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Samuel Johnson's Reputation as a Critic.

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SAMUEL JOHNSON'S REPUTATION AS A CRITIC

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ABSTRACT

The conventional modern view holds that Samuel Johnson's criticism exerted no influence between 1825 and 1910. But despite the fact that Johnson the critic was in disgrace with most authorities during this period he nevertheless continued to be an active force in the world of letters. The Lives of the Poets was frequently published and apparently widely read after 1850, and there is some evidence that even the Shakespeare criticism was not entirely forgotten. On the whole, then, it appears that Johnson the critic not only retained a vigorous minority following throughout the nineteenth century but actually enjoyed a mild revival between 1875 and 1910.

Contrary to what we have assumed, however, the appearance in 1910 of Sir Walter Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson does not mark a great leap forward in Johnson's reputation. Indeed, all the evidence points to a pronounced decline in Johnson's influence between 1910 and 1940. The main reason for this decline seems to have been a growing preoccupation during these years with the question of Johnson's role as a transitional critic. Hence even sympathetic writers tended to judge his importance in terms of what they took to be his stand relative to the coming of Romanticism, and, inevitably, he came to be categorized as either an enemy of progress or a humble precursor of what were assumed to be far greater

critics. Thus, despite the fact that D. Nichol Smith, T. S. Eliot, and others were writing favorably about his criticism at the time, the nineteen-twenties and thirties must be recognized as the nadir of Johnson's reputation. Certainly no other age has been less interested in his criticism as criticism.

The starting point of the current revival of Johnson's criticism seems to coincide with the publication in 1944 of Joseph Wood Krutch's Samuel Johnson. But, although Johnson clearly exerts more influence today than at any other time since his death, it is not to be inferred that his criticism is universally admired. In this connection, the most prominent single issue dividing modern critics on Johnson is the question of the relation of literature to life. Those important modern critics who insist that art is autonomous have generally dealt with Johnson as an irrelevant museum piece. But equally prominent critics regard literature as an outgrowth of culture or as a reflection of general human experience. These critics tend to cite Johnson as the best exemplar to be found of what a literary critic ideally ought to be. Moreover, it is evident that Johnson is a dominant force in some of the most important areas of modern scholarship, namely the criticism of Shakespeare, and of Metaphysical and Neoclassical poetry. On balance, he would appear to be more influential than any other great English critic of the past.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE MODERN VIEW REVIEWED

If the conventional modern view of Samuel Johnson's reputation as a critic -- or indeed as a man of letters generally -- between his day and our own were to be sketched out on a chart of the sort used to reflect the vicissitudes of the Dow-Jones Industrials, the result would have a most dramatic appearance. In such a representation, Johnson's "line" would be seen to descend at a very steep angle from the top of the chart at 1784 -- the year of his death -- to vanish off the bottom of the chart at 1831. There would be a gap of some eighty years with no line showing at all. Then, at 1910, the line would reappear at the bottom of the chart, proceed to a point perhaps a third of the way up at the end of World War II, and in the mid-fifties skyrocket to a position perhaps somewhat higher than its point of origin.

To be sure, literary reputations cannot be charted in such a fashion, but the image suggested is not a misleading one insofar as it reflects what we have come to assume about the fortunes of Johnson's criticism over the years. The question of Johnson's reputation as a writer and critic is complicated, of course, by the fact that, while his stature as a man of letters is generally assumed to have eroded entirely away during the fifty years following his death, his appeal as a personality has been such that A. S. F. Gow, writing

in 1931, could say with justification that "For nearly a hundred years, or, to be precise, since September 1831, it has been a commonplace among educated Englishmen that Samuel Johnson is better known to us than any man in history."[1] Most modern scholars seem to agree with Gow that much of Johnson's continuing fame as a personality dates not from Boswell's great Life of Johnson but from the appearance of what is certainly one of the most influential book reviews ever written: Thomas Babington Macaulay's unenthusiastic appraisal of Croker's 1831 edition of Boswell.[2] It will be recalled that in this review Macaulay does more than denounce Croker and present a simplified and somewhat distorted picture of Samuel Johnson's personal eccentricities; he also advances a highly original theory concerning the traits of character which enabled James Boswell to become the world's foremost biographer, and, what is more to our purpose, he offers a damning evaluation of Johnson's literary criticism which has seemed to color every subsequent consideration of that subject. Macaulay's observation that Johnson's critiques on Shakespeare and Milton "seem to us as wretched as if they had been written by Rymer himself, whom we take to have been the worst critic that ever lived"[3] is, of course, well known, and his opinion as to what had happened to Johnson's stature as a critic between 1784 and 1831 is no less emphatic: "The judgments which Johnson passed on books were, in his own time, regarded with superstitious veneration; and, in our time, are generally treated with indiscriminate contempt."[4]

As we shall see in a moment, the notion that Johnson ruled as something of a literary dictator in his day, a notion that does not originate with Macaulay in any event, has not been universally accepted by modern scholarship; however, almost no one has doubted the validity or influence of Macaulay's assertion that Johnson's criticism was in receivership as of 1831. For example, in his well-known study "The Double Tradition of Dr. Johnson," Bertrand Bronson not only accepts Macaulay's estimate at face value, but credits it with moulding learned opinion throughout the nineteenth century. Specifically, he cites Thomas Sergeant Perry's English Literature in the Eighteenth Century as proof that "the learned tradition [was] apparently by [1882] immutably set along the lines forecast by Macaulay":

> With all the confidence of learning and leadership, Perry declared of Johnson: that all his views had been riddled by a later opinion . . . that, while it might be allowed that the Preface to Shakespeare, though tinged with antique notions, had been serviceable to letters, the influence of the Lives of the Poets could only have been bad.[5]

Similarly, R. W. Chapman accepts as fact the idea that Johnson the author and critic had no following after the first quarter of the new century:

> About the year 1825 . . . the publishers and their public concluded that the Works of Johnson were no longer necessary to salvation. The Life continued to be printed, edited, and supplemented; and a subsidiary literature began to collect around it, of which Macaulay's Essay and Life, and Carlyle's Review are the most famous examples.[6]

Although James L. Clifford cites the number of nineteenth century editions of Rasselas as proof that Johnson still retained a few readers, he nevertheless takes the position which Bronson and Chapman had assumed:

> Almost without question Johnson was ignored as a literary artist and critic. His style was thought to be too pompous and heavy, his subject matter too rigidly didactic, his criticism too bigoted and unimaginative. Only his life was interesting.[7]

In addition, two twentieth century studies which have been specifically concerned with Johnson's reputation have supported the conventional view of Johnson's nineteenth century decline. Robert N. Lass' "A Brief History of the Criticism of Dr. Johnson" presents the picture of a Johnson cut in two early in the century, "the man continuing to enjoy a considerable reputation and the writer being neglected."[8] More pointedly, William Kenney, in his much more comprehensive "The Modern Reputation of Samuel Johnson," begins his chapter on Johnson's criticism by quoting Lytton Strachey's well-known comment (i.e. "Johnson's aesthetic judgments . . . always have some good quality to recommend them -- except one: they are never right.") and goes on to say, in 1956: "Seventy-five years ago Strachey's view was held by almost everyone, scholars and general public."[9]

As for Johnson's twentieth century comeback, most commentators cite the appearance of Sir Walter Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson as the approximate starting point,[10] and few would disagree with Clifford's observation that it is Johnson's criticism which is currently undergoing "the most pro-

nounced revival."[11] It is difficult, of course, to establish precisely how far the revival of Johnson's criticism has progressed; but Donald J. Greene has recently advanced a most impressive claim: "The fact is that at no time in history, not even in his own lifetime, has Johnson's criticism been taken more seriously than at present."[12]

Such, then, is the conventional modern view of Johnson's reputation as a critic through the years: he is seen as a giant in his own century, a zero throughout most of the next, and a giant again in the second half of ours. It should be stated immediately that the conventional view is not entirely misleading. Johnson obviously did enjoy immense stature as a critic in his own day, and to suggest that he did not lose ground drastically in the half-century following his death is to suggest that the Romantic movement did not, in fact, occur. Likewise, all evidence seems to indicate that the Victorians were more interested in the personality of the man than in the editor of Shakespeare and the biographer-critic of English poets. And, finally, even the most cursory glance at the burgeoning Johnson bibliography of recent years is sufficient to prove that there has been in our time a signal upsurge of interest in Johnson the critic.

While it is true in its major delineations, however, there is some reason to believe that our conventional view does stand in need of certain minor modifications. Specifically, we may still tend to rank Johnson too high in his own age despite the fact that modern scholarship has been inclined

to disparage the notion of his so-called literary dictatorship. More importantly, we have almost certainly ranked him too low in the age which followed, for while considerably dimmed, Johnson's reputation as a critic does not seem to have been in total eclipse at any time in the nineteenth century. Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, there is some evidence to support the view that Johnson's criticism actually enjoyed something of an unobtrusive revival in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. But if the evidence points to a mild Johnson comeback in the years between 1875 and 1910, it also suggests, as we shall see in Chapter Three, that Johnson the critic lost rather than gained ground in the thirty-year period which followed. Of the gains which Johnson has scored since the onset of World War II there can, of course, be no doubt; as M. H. Abrams has remarked in an enviable phrase, Johnson becomes in these years "more and more a part of our usable critical past."[13] As will be made clear in Chapter Four, however, Johnson's criticism is not taken so seriously in all quarters as Donald J. Greene's assertion might lead one to infer.

Prior to embarking on a consideration of Johnson's fortunes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, we need to examine the question of his reputation in his own day, and also a topic which has received far less attention: the general assumption that Johnson the writer and critic was not read at all after 1831.

As we have noted, modern scholarship has been divided on the subject

of Johnson's ostensible literary dictatorship. The persistent idea that Johnson's word was law in the literary world of his day seems already to have been widely held when Tobias Smollett first characterized him as the Great Cham of Literature, and it has found prominent supporters in the twentieth century. R. W. Chapman, for example, has asserted that "Throughout the reign of George the Third, Johnson, alive or dead, wielded despotic authority."[14] In a similar vein, F. A. Pottle has remarked that "It is not simply for convenience of nomenclature that we speak of the last half of the eighteenth century as 'the Age of Johnson.' Johnson was not only the most arresting literary figure of the period; he dominated it personally. . . . his position as a literary dictator appears something quite unparalleled in our annals."[15] Chauncey Brewster Tinker, on the other hand, has expressed the view that "Kingship in any of its eighteenth-century phases is but a mournful study" and has argued that the Age of Johnson "was no more inclined to acknowledge the authority of a literary than of a political monarch."[16] In support of his position, he points to Johnson's inability to inflate the reputation of Watts or to deflate the reputations of Fielding, Sterne, and Gray.[17] Joseph Wood Krutch simply dismisses the entire concept as ridiculous: "A dictator cannot remain a dictator if too many people dispute his authority, and once one gets outside the circle of Johnson's intimates, one finds a considerable number of people ready to pooh-pooh his pronouncements."[18] More recently, Isaac Newton Walker has advanced the suggestion that

Johnson's authority was of necessity "limited and partial" owing to the fact that so many eighteenth century literary figures "were at such an aesthetic, emotional, or geographic remove -- or all three -- from the world of the Club and Johnson's personal influence that they could scarcely have been 'dictated to' in literary matters had they wanted to be."[19] Indeed, Walker reminds us that even the three primarily "literary" men in Johnson's circle -- Goldsmith, Garrick, and Sheridan -- showed unmistakable signs of independence.[20]

In addition to Walker's study, we have three other recent dissertations by Helen Louise McGuffie, Ira L. Morgan, and Richard A. Carroll, all based on extensive research in eighteenth century sources, which give us, cumulatively, a clearer idea of Johnson's contemporary stature as a critic than we have had heretofore.[21] In this connection, the reception of the Lives of the Poets seems to constitute an advantageous point of reference. The most obvious advantage lies in the fact that the studies of Walker and Carroll focus primarily on the Lives. In addition, however, Carroll's thesis implies that the reception of the Lives of the Poets is especially significant because that work represents "the final stage in [Johnson's] critical development," that in which he put to the test "many of the principles he had labored so hard to establish."[22] Furthermore, Miss McGuffie tells us that the Lives of the Poets was the first of Johnson's productions to be received in what could be called an objective critical climate, for, with the exception of two insanely savage pamphlets put out by James Thomson Callender in 1782

and 1783, the reviewers were mostly men of letters who were restrained and objective, even when voicing adverse opinions of the Lives.[23] Needless to say, this restraint and objectivity represented quite a departure from the practice of many earlier reviewers -- among them William Kenrick, Archibald Campbell, and Charles Churchill -- who were inclined to concentrate on the alleged physical and moral deformities of the author rather than on the work at hand. Finally, both Morgan and Walker conclude that Johnson's reputation as a critic was at its zenith during the years when the Lives was published.[24]

The picture of Johnson which emerges from these studies is that of a man who obviously enjoyed immense prestige and respect, and one whom we should continue to regard as the most eminent man of letters of his day. But it seems clear that, as a critic, his influence was not nearly so overwhelming as many nineteenth and twentieth century scholars have concluded. To be sure, the Lives of the Poets was favorably and even enthusiastically received; however, even though his harshest reviewers granted him a place of preeminence in the realm of letters and acknowledged his great powers as a critic, virtually all of them not only objected strenuously to many of his specific pronouncements but clearly regarded his critical principles to be out of date.[25] Generally speaking, the reviewers censured Johnson for prejudice, particularly in the biographical portions of the Lives of Swift and Milton,[26] for attempting to tear down strong reputations and undergird

feeble ones, and most emphatically of all for what they considered the disproportionate ratio of brickbats to bouquets in virtually every one of his critiques.[27] The most significant and vigorous opposition focused on the Life of Gray. Here Johnson was severely reprimanded for adversely judging Gray's more fanciful compositions, the Progress of Poesy and the Bard, against what the reviewers considered the irrelevant criteria of realism and didacticism. In addition, the reviewers were clearly on Gray's side, not only in the controversy over the poet's use of mythological fiction but in the debate over his practice in matters of metaphor and diction.[28] Interestingly enough, Johnson's strictures of a similar sort against Lycidas, which were to become so notorious in later years, went relatively unnoticed at the time of their publication.[29]

In view of the serious and widespread objections to the point of view operative in the Life of Gray, it seems reasonable to conclude that the general transition to an essentially appreciative criticism -- one based on the appeal of poetry to some extra-rational faculty -- was already in an advanced stage of development at the time the Lives of the Poets was published. In fact, when one compares the attack which the reviewers launched against some of Johnson's major critical principles with the assertion made earlier that his reputation as a critic was at its peak at the time of the publication of the Lives, the result seems to be something of a paradox. Walker finds an explanation of the phenomenon in Johnson's towering stature as a moralist,

for, as he puts it, "the ordinary reader, whatever the degree of admiration he might have felt for Johnson's criticism, seems to have valued his moral sentiments . . . more than he valued his criticism per se."[31] Indeed, Johnson's overall reputation must have been sturdy to survive the objections which were raised against his criticism in the Lives, and it is difficult to disagree with Walker's conclusion -- which the other three studies seem to support -- that Johnson, as a purely literary authority, "was probably regarded with less veneration than later ages have supposed."[32]

The question of Johnson's readership in the nineteenth century has received less attention than that of his contemporary reputation. As indicated earlier, most authorities have simply concluded that he was not read at all after 1825 except perhaps by a few devotees of Rasselas. It is true, of course, that 1825 marked the publication of the last complete edition of Johnson's Works prior to the Yale edition presently underway, and there are ample statements to support the view that he had no following. Carlyle, for example, cheerfully admitted in the late eighteen-thirties that "Johnson's writings, which once had such currency and celebrity, are now, as it were, disowned by the younger generation."[33] Sir Archibald Alison also concluded that, as of 1850, very few people read the Lives of the Poets, "admirable as are the criticisms on our greatest authors which they contain."[34] "Sir Nathaniel," writing in the New Monthly Magazine in 1855, observed that Peter Cunningham's edition of the Lives of the Poets might be either a mis-

take or a mischief: "a mistake, if on the presumption that there is a demand for the present supply; a mischief, if with assurance that the supply will beget the demand."[35] An anonymous writer on Boswell in an 1870 issue of All the Year Round similarly dismissed Johnson as "the author of many works that no one cares to read,"[36] a conclusion that is shared by an equally anonymous essayist in the New Monthly Magazine three years later, who noted that "very few people now-a-days read his books."[37] At about the same time, Alfred H. Welsh was concluding on this side of the Atlantic that "the reputation of his writings is fading everyday, but his peculiarities are immortal,"[38] and, in 1884, James Hay presented his Johnson: his Characteristics and Aphorisms to the British public as a kind of centenary memorial, "considering that Johnson's works are now almost forgotten."[39] Several years later, Edward Everett Hale remarked that Johnson's "works are, on the whole, forgotten, and unread even by cultivated people."[40] Similarly, Joseph M. Gleeson observed that "if the fame of Dr. Johnson depended on his writings alone, few wreaths would now be laid on his tomb."[41] In 1919, Brander Matthews, setting out in the role of the devil's advocate to probe the claims to greatness of Ruskin, Carlyle and Samuel Johnson, concluded that Johnson was the easiest of the three to dispose of, for, while the works of Carlyle and Ruskin were "abundantly read," the works of Johnson, "even if reprinted from time to time, remained unread except by special students."[42] In the same year, Sir Walter Raleigh published a somewhat more specific estimate of Johnson's

readership in his well-known Six Essays on Johnson: "For every reader of Johnson's works, there have been perhaps fifty readers of Boswell's Life, and a hundred of Macaulay's Essays."[43]

Obviously, one cannot ignore such emphatic statements of opinion; but there are a number of factors which suggest that these statements are not an altogether reliable index to Johnson's readership in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For instance, while no complete edition of Johnson's Works appeared after 1825, the bibliography which John P. Anderson contributed as an appendix to Lt. Colonel F. Grant's Life of Johnson[44] shows that eight complete editions of the Lives of the Poets, plus five abridged editions (including two editions of the Six Chief Lives, edited by Matthew Arnold) appeared in England between 1825 and 1887.[45] In addition, James L. Clifford's Johnsonian Studies reflects the publication of eight more complete editions and two more editions of Arnold's Six Chief Lives between 1887 and 1907.[46] This makes a total of sixteen complete editions, plus seven abridged editions (not to mention separate publication during the same years of three editions of the Life of Addison, six of Dryden, eight of Pope, six of Milton, and one each of Prior, Congreve, and Swift) of the Lives during a time when Johnson is popularly supposed to have been in cold storage as a writer and critic. There is, of course, no necessary correlation between the number of editions published and Johnson's readership in any given period, but if the bibliographies cited are reliable and if Sir Walter Raleigh's ratio

of Johnson's readers to those of Boswell and Macaulay is taken to be exact, one is driven to suspect solely on the basis of the publication record of the Lives of the Poets and of Rasselas (the same sources show that there were thirty-six editions of Rasselas between 1825 and 1910)[47] that Boswell's Life of Johnson was widely read indeed and that Macaulay's Essays enjoyed a readership of staggering proportions.

Fortunately, we do not have to depend on publication data alone; we have additional evidence to support the contention that Johnson's Lives of the Poets claimed a wider following than the commentators cited previously would allow. For example, there is the opening sentence of an unsigned essay in an 1860 issue of the Saturday Review: "Scarcely any book written a century ago enjoys greater popularity now than Johnson's Lives of the Poets."[48] Writing on "Johnson without Boswell" in 1878, William Cyples likewise designated Johnson as "the only critic we have who is read from one generation to another" and makes the further interesting observation that "he yet remains for his countrymen the standard critic of Shakespeare."[49] Less than ten years later, we find an anonymous writer in the Quarterly Review expressing the opinion that the popular assumption "That Johnson's immortality is due only to Boswell, is one of those oft-repeated maxims which those who utter them seldom take the trouble to test. We believe that, in spite of all his defects, Johnson will find readers and admirers amongst the best of each generation, as long as the English language lasts."[50] Writing the same

year in the Contemporary Review, Augustine Birrell showed even less patience with the notion that Johnson was unread in Victorian England, although admittedly his preference for the Life of Blackmore makes him a somewhat shaky witness in support of the idea that the Lives was read during these years primarily for its criticism:

> Everybody does not read Boswell, and a great many people do read Johnson. . . . Do Mr. Browning, Mr. Arnold, Mr. Lowell, Mr. Trevelyan, Mr. Stephen, Mr. Morley, know their Johnson? "To doubt would be disloyalty." And what these big men know in their big way hundreds of little men know in their little way.[51]

Even the contemptuous writer in the 1892 issue of Temple Bar, whose conviction that Boswell had "unearthed" and "embalmed" an otherwise defunct Johnson has been cited by Clifford as typical of the age,[52] was compelled to admit that not all of Johnson's productions had been forgotten: "Perhaps an exception should be made in favor of his 'Lives of the Poets,' meagre and unfair as too many of them are."[53]

Equally convincing evidence that Johnson was more widely read in late nineteenth and early twentieth century England than we have believed is found in Edmund Gosse's turn-of-the-century English Literature: An Illustrated Record. As proof that Johnson's criticism had no influence in the period, William Kenney has cited Gosse's observation that "no one turns to Johnson's pages any longer to know what to think about Milton or Gray";[54]

but no one has paid attention to the discussion of Johnson and Warton which follows Gosse's remarks on Milton and Gray and which makes by implication a contradictory point:

> During the very same years [in which the Lives was produced] Thomas Warton was publishing his History of English Poetry, in which all the features were found which Johnson lacked -- broad and liberal study, an enthusiasm for romance, a sense of something above and beyond the rules of critics, a breadth of real poetry undreamed of by Johnson. Warton knew his subject; Johnson did not. Warton prophesied of a dawning age, and Johnson stiffly contented himself with the old. Warton was accurate, painstaking, copious; Johnson was careless, indolent, inaccurate; yet, unfair as it seems, to-day everybody still reads Johnson, and no one opens the pages of Warton.[55]

The Bookman Illustrated History of English Literature, co-authored in 1906 by Thomas Seccombe and W. Robertson Nicoll, also yields an interesting reflection on the readership of the Lives of the Poets. The modern notion that the Lives was entirely neglected by nineteenth century readers is clearly one that had not occurred to the authors: "The Lives were an immense success, and soon became as popular as they have almost ever since continued to be."[56]

Perhaps the most compelling testimony on the subject of the continuing popularity of the Lives of the Poets is that of J. Churton Collins, which appeared in a 1908 issue of the Quarterly Review. As we shall see in the chapter which follows, Collins was convinced that Johnson's criticism was in

some respects a dangerous influence, but, like it or not, he was forced to conclude that the Lives of the Poets had become a permanent fixture in English letters on the basis of its strong appeal to generation after generation of ordinary British readers:

> In spite of all that has intervened since its first appearance, the transformation of the poetry and criticism characteristic of the eighteenth century into the poetry and criticism characteristic of the nineteenth, the indifference with which most of the poets who are the subjects of its critiques are regarded by modern readers, the inevitable dissatisfaction with the aims, the principles, the methods of the older school of criticism, induced by familiarity with those of the schools succeeding it -- in spite of all this, it is probable that no decade has passed without new impressions being called for; and that the work still retains its vitality and attractiveness is sufficiently shown by the title-pages transcribed at the head of this article. It requires no great sagacity to foresee that whatever, and however serious, may be the defects of a work which has stood such a test as this, its permanency is secured; for better or worse it is classical.[57]

In view of the evidence, then, it seems clear that Johnson had a somewhat wider readership in the years between 1825 and 1910 than we have been accustomed to believe. Moreover, on the basis of the number of editions of the Lives issued between 1890 and 1910 and some of the comments we have just been looking at, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that Johnson enjoyed something of a resurgence during these years. Indeed, it is possible to argue in this connection that Johnson the critic exerted a more

fundamental and meaningful kind of influence during these years, when he was nominally in disgrace with most authorities, than he does today, when many of our most widely respected scholars and critics have rallied to his cause. Some of the writers cited in this chapter obviously believed that Johnson had in their time a considerable appeal for what they probably would have termed the Common Reader. But as F. R. Leavis has recently observed, "There is [today] no Common Reader: the tradition is dead."[58] Thus, although in terms of sheer numbers Johnson the critic may have today a greater readership than he had sixty or seventy years ago, it seems safe to assume that the bulk of his modern readership is confined to the academic community, and that much of it therefore is something less than voluntary.[59] But the evident demise of the Common Reader is, happily, not a matter that need concern us here. The point to be stressed is that Johnson the critic was obviously not forgotten by Victorian and Edwardian readers.

It is possible, of course, that the Lives of the Poets continued to be read in these years -- as indeed it is profitable to read it now -- for its biographical and moral content.[60] But some of the comments noted in this chapter indicate that the criticism was read, too. In fact, as we shall see in the next chapter, there is additional evidence to support the view that not only the criticism in the Lives of the Poets, but also the Shakespeare criticism, as Cyples' comment suggests, exerted at least some influence throughout the nineteenth century. The most important fact to note here, however, is that

neither of the two most persistent notions about Johnson's reputation in the years since his death -- that he was the literary dictator of his age, and that he was completely ignored as a writer and critic by nineteenth century readers -- seems to stand up under close scrutiny.

NOTES

CHAPTER I

[1]"The Unknown Johnson," Life and Letters, VII (September 1931), 200.

[2]Edinburgh Review, LIV (1831), 1-38. Concerning Macaulay's role in the formation of Johnson's popular tradition, Bertrand Bronson argues, in the essay cited below, that Boswell's image of Johnson was "of a complexity and subtlety far transcending what could be used and carried by the general. Cheap and striking reproduction, enormously simplified, was the need; and the need was supplied, unquestionably, by Macaulay's review of Croker's Boswell in 1831" (p. 287). Sir Walter Raleigh had earlier designated Macaulay as the source of Johnson's distorted popular image: "The cheapest estimate and the most garish portrait . . . have captured the popular imagination." Six Essays on Johnson (London, 1910), p. 174. More recently, Donald J. Greene has characterized Johnson's entire nineteenth century reputation as "the preposterous travesty given currency by Macaulay building on Boswell." Samuel Johnson, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Donald J. Greene (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), p. 3. Among those who have detected an element of irony in the continuing fame and influence of Macaulay's review is Esmond S. DeBeer, who notes that it "was an occasional piece, intended for a six months' life; only the accident of Macaulay's genius has perpetuated it." "Macaulay on Croker, Boswell, and Johnson," The New Rambler (July 1952), p. 5. In this regard, however, the continuing fascination of subsequent generations of Englishmen and Americans with Johnson's character and career, and their apparent compulsion to tell and retell the story set forth by Boswell, Hawkins, and others, seems too large and complicated a phenomenon to be laid at the door of any one man -- even so positive and persuasive a man as Macaulay. The unflagging interest in Johnson was frankly puzzling to the nineteenth century Frenchman, Léon Boucher: "Il semblerait qu'après Macaulay et Carlyle il n'y eût plus grand'chose à dire sur son compte. Il n'en est rien pourtant, et ce sujet paraît vraiment doué d'une jeunesse éternelle, à en juger par le nombre de livres, de recherches ou de discussions auquels il prête." "Un dictateur littéraire: Samuel Johnson et ses critiques," Revue des Deux Mondes, troisième per. XXXVII (Février 1, 1880), 675.

[3]Edinburgh Review, LIV (1831), 32-33.

[4]Ibid., p. 31.

[5]Eighteenth Century English Literature, ed. James L. Clifford (New York, 1959), p. 289.

[6]"Johnson's Reputation," TLS, September 1, 1921, p. 554.

[7]"A Survey of Johnsonian Studies," Johnsonian Studies (Minneapolis, 1951), p. 2.

[8]Unpubl. diss. (Iowa State University, 1942), p. 27.

[9]Unpubl. diss. (Boston University, 1956), p. 217.

[10]Bronson (p. 290), Lass (p. 27), Clifford (p. 6), and Chapman, Two Centuries of Johnson Scholarship (Glasgow, 1945), p. 23, all cite Sir Walter Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson as an important and influential landmark, although it should be noted that Clifford regards the work of D. Nichol Smith as even more influential in the twentieth century (p. 6). Warren L. Fleischauer has also designated Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson as "a book that perhaps did more than any other single piece of twentieth-century criticism to retrieve Johnson's reputation from the nineteenth-century bower of literary bliss." "Dr. Johnson's Editing and Criticism of Shakespeare's Lancastrian Cycle," unpubl. diss. (Western Reserve University, 1951), p. 66. Kenney suggests that "the anti-romanticism that developed early in the century found in [Johnson's] works a convenient starting point for attacking what T. E. Hulme called 'the state of slush in which we have the misfortune to live'" (p. 219). But he stresses Raleigh's importance also: "For the first time in over a hundred years, a significant critic took seriously what Johnson had to say" (p. 225).

[11]"A Survey of Johnsonian Studies," p. 14.

[12]"Introduction," Samuel Johnson, A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 5.

[13]"The Truth about Dr. Johnson," Kenyon Review, XVI (1955), 308.

[14]"Johnson's Reputation," p. 553.

[15]"Preface," Margaret Ashmun, The Singing Swan: An Account of Anna Seward and her Acquaintance with Dr. Johnson, Boswell, and Others of their Time (New Haven, 1931), p. vii. Pottle's view is somewhat more complex than the quotation reveals. His argument proceeds as follows: since Johnson's circle gave the age its distinctive flavor, and since Johnson, a literary man, dominated that circle, he is to be considered a literary dictator.

[16]Essays in Retrospect (New Haven, 1948), p. 23.

[17]Ibid., pp. 23-24.

[18]Samuel Johnson (New York, 1944), p. 198.

[19]"Johnson's Criticism Criticized: The Contemporary View of Johnson's Later Reputation," unpubl. diss. (University of Texas, 1966), p. 69.

[20]Ibid., p. 28.

[21]McGuffie, "Samuel Johnson and the Hostile Press," unpubl. diss. (Columbia University, 1961); Morgan, "Contemporary Criticism of the Works of Samuel Johnson," unpubl. diss. (University of Florida, 1954); and Carroll, "Johnson's Lives of the Poets and Currents of English Criticism, 1750-1779," unpubl. diss. (University of Michigan, 1950).

[22]Carroll, p. 238.

[23]McGuffie, pp. 3, 45.

[24]Morgan, p. 291; Walker, p. 9.

[25]Carroll, p. 395; Walker, p. 160.

[26]McGuffie, pp. 293, 297.

[27]Walker, pp. 161-62; Morgan, pp. 364-65.

[28]Morgan, p. 302; Walker, pp. 69, 74-77; McGuffie, pp. 307-09.

[29]Walker (p. 72) offers an amusing conjecture on this score: "Presumably [the critics] were so exercised over the scathing biographical part of the Life of Milton that they were gratefully relieved to discover the critical part to be generally in Milton's favor."

[30]Carroll, p. 395; Walker, p. 159.

[31]Walker, p. 159.

[32]Ibid.

[33]*On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, *The Works of Thomas Carlyle* (London, 1897), V, 182.

[34]*Essays* (London, 1850), III, 392.

[35]"Johnson's Lives of the Poets," *New Monthly Magazine*, CIII (1855), 19.

[36]"Dr. Johnson -- from a Scottish Point of View," *All the Year Round*, III (1870), 564.

[37]"Dr. Johnson," *New Monthly Magazine*, III n.s. (1873), 440.

[38]*Development of English Literature and Language* (Chicago, 1882), II, 178.

[39](Paisley, 1884), p. vi.

[40]*Lights of Two Centuries* (New York, 1887), p. 175.

[41]*Dr. Johnson: His Life, Works, and Table Talk* (New York, 1893), p. 9.

[42]*Gateways to Literature* (New York, 1912), pp. 108-09. Matthews' essays first appeared in the *Century Magazine*, LXXX (July 1910), 339-340. His premise, that "the position of these writers is almost unchallenged; they continue to be showered with superabundant praise" (p. 100), in itself suggests that Johnson the writer was not entirely despised at the time Matthews wrote. His essay yields additional evidence of a Johnsonian influence. The second sentence of his essay has a familiar ring; Matthews asserts that a work of art "which has pleased long and pleased many, in all probability possesses qualities which justify its success" (p. 100).

[43](London, 1910), p. 174.

[44](London, 1887), pp. i-xxviii.

[45]*Ibid.*, pp. vi-vii.

[46]Pp. 112-13.

[47]Anderson, pp. vii-ix; Clifford, pp. 102-03.

[48]"Johnson's Lives of the Poets," reprinted in Littell's Living Age, LXIV (1860), 340.

[49]Contemporary Review, XXXII (July 1878), 725, 219.

[50]"Samuel Johnson and His Age," Quarterly Review, CLIX (1885), 149.

[51]"Dr. Johnson," XLVII (January 1885), 32.

[52]Johnsonian Studies, p. 2.

[53]"Boswell's Johnson," XCV (June 1892), 256. The writer was also willing to concede currency to "that strangely affecting and humiliating collection of 'Prayers and Meditations,' in which fits of ardent piety induced by remembrance of dead Tetty stand cheek-by-jowl with equally ardent fits of heartburn induced by surfeit of cold veal-pie" (p. 256).

[54]"The Modern Reputation of Samuel Johnson," p. 220.

[55](London, 1903), III, 331. This passage offers an interesting contrast to an earlier observation by Gosse: "Must we not admit now, at the close of a century, that it is practically impossible to read [Johnson]?" "Samuel Johnson," Fortnightly Review, XXXVI n.s. (1884), 784.

[56](London, 1906), II, 320.

[57]"Dr. Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets'," CCVII (January 1908), 72-73. The title pages alluded to are as follows: Lives of the English Poets, ed. George Birkbeck Hill. 3 vols. Oxford, 1905; Lives of the most Eminent English Poets, with critical observations on their works. ed. Peter Cunningham. 3 vols. London, 1854; The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets." ed. Matthew Arnold. London, 1878; Johnson's Lives of the Poets. ed. Mrs. Alexander Napier, with an introduction by J. W. Hales. 3 vols. London, 1890; Johnson's Lives of the Poets. ed. Arthur Waugh. 6 vols. London, 1896; The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets. ed. W. E. Henley. 3 vols. London, 1896; and Johnsonian Miscellanies. ed. George Birkbeck Hill. 2 vols. Oxford, 1897. It is one of the many ironies inherent in the subject of Johnson's reputation as a critic over the years that the most frequently cited deprecations of his criticism (e.g. the comments of Lytton Strachey noted earlier, and those of Collins, which will be dealt with in the next chapter) are set forth in reviews of new editions of the Lives of the Poets. This significance of context has been almost completely ignored by twentieth century scholarship.

[58]Education and the University, A Sketch for an "English School" (New York, 1948), p. 107.

[59]A recent "popular" essay on the Life of Johnson seems to support the idea that Johnson the writer and critic has little if any following among the general public. After prefacing his discussion of Boswell's biography with the observation that Johnson's Dictionary has been superseded, William Henry Chamberlain goes on to say: "Of the eminent lexicographer's other works, only those in search of literary curiosities are now likely to turn to Rasselas or The Rambler. Even the Lives of the Poets, perhaps his best work, is no longer avidly read." "The Withering Wit of Samuel Johnson," Saturday Review of Literature (September 4, 1965), p. 14.

[60]George Saintsbury made a pertinent observation on this possibility: "As a book, [the Lives of the Poets] have not missed their due meed of praise; as a critical book, one may think that they have." A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe, II (London, 1902), 493.

CHAPTER II

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY:

NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

It is customary today to regard Samuel Johnson as one of the more prominent victims of the new critics of the Romantic age. R. W. Chapman provides us with a succinct statement of the prevailing view:

> These literary Jacobins met, as we know, at Mr. Lamb's house on Thursday evenings, for the making and unmaking of reputations; and there Hazlitt tells us that "the author of the Rambler was only tolerated in Boswell's Life of him."[1]

Certainly, the Romantic critics could have little use for Johnson, for it will be remembered that the dominant idea of their movement was an other-worldly conception of poetry which compelled anyone who embraced it completely to relegate Samuel Johnson to the rear ranks.[2] In essence, this not altogether new conception, which found its most influential champions in Wordsworth and Coleridge, held the source of poetry to be the perhaps involuntary fusion of the poet's imagination with some transcendant reality. Since Johnson had been inclined to regard the encouragement of any extra-rational faculty as a deliberate flirtation with madness and had insisted from first to last that poetry reflect the experience of this world in a manner congenial to good sense, decorum, and traditional morality, he was, from the Romantic point of view, simply out of touch with the poetic process and therefore no critic.[3]

It should be pointed out, perhaps, that even his severest nineteenth century detractors were willing to give Johnson credit for acuteness within his limitations. For example, it may not be remembered that Macaulay, in the same context in which he made his notorious observations on Johnson's competence as a critic of Shakespeare and Milton, expressed the highest kind of praise for his competence as a critic of Pope.[4] In similar fashion, Hazlitt lauded Johnson's dissertation on metaphysical poetry in the Life of Cowley, which he saw as a subject "for which Dr. Johnson's powers both of thought and expression were better fitted than any other man's."[5] He hastened to make it clear, however, that the achievement belonged to some lesser category of criticism:

> If he had had the same capacity of following the flights of a truly poetic imagination, or for feeling the finer touches of nature, that he had felicity and force in detecting and exposing the aberrations from the broad and beaten path of propriety and common sense, he would have amply deserved the reputation he has acquired as a philosophic critic.[6]

Unfortunately for Johnson's reputation, the great majority of nineteenth century commentators agreed with Hazlitt and his colleagues that the inability to follow the flights of the poetic imagination constituted a fatal deficiency, and by the final quarter of the century a formidable body of opinion had come to assume that the criticism of common sense was part of a dead system which had been completely invalidated by the new ideas of the Romantics.[7] Representative of this point of view is C. E. Vaughan, who

damned Johnson as an out-and-out menace to literature -- a rule-ridden enemy of all originality in poetry owing to his inability to comprehend the mysteries of the poetic imagination:

> To adopt Johnson's method is, in truth, to misconceive the whole nature of poetry and of poetic imagination. The ideas that have shaped the work of one poet may act as guide and spur, but can never be a rule -- far less a law -- to the imagination of another. The idea, as it comes to an artist, is not a law imposing itself from without; it is a seed of life and energy springing from within. This, however, was a truth entirely hidden from the eyes of Johnson and the Augustan critics.[8]

A better-natured statement of the idea that previous critical approaches had been swept away by the Romantics was set forth in Lytton Strachey's review of George Birkbeck Hill's edition of the Lives of the Poets, the review containing the widely-quoted observation that Johnson's aesthetic judgments are never right. Like many another nineteenth and early twentieth century commentator on Johnson, Strachey managed to talk out of both sides of his mouth at once, for he greeted the new edition as proof of the enduring appeal of Johnson's intellect and at the same time dismissed the criticism as futile. Strachey reconciled the paradox on the basis of Johnson's wit: "It is his wit . . . that has sanctified Johnson's perversities and errors, that has embalmed him forever, and that has put his book, with all its mass of antiquated doctrine, beyond the reach of time."[9] What had rendered Johnson's criticism obsolete was, of course, the upsurge of mysticism at the beginning

of the nineteenth century. Specifically, Strachey lauded the appearance of The Ancient Mariner, which "swept into the poet's vision a whole new universe of infinite and eternal things; it was the discovery of the Unknown";

> [P]oetry to us means, primarily, something which suggests, by means of words, mysteries and infinitudes. Thus, music and imagination seem to us the most essential qualities of poetry, because they are the most potent means by which such suggestions may be invoked. But the eighteenth century knew none of these things . . . there was nothing at all strange about the world; it was charming, it was disgusting, it was ridiculous, and it was just what one might have expected. In such a world, why should poetry, more than anything else, be mysterious? No! Let it be sensible; that was enough.[10]

Certainly, then, there was no lack of precedent for Brander Matthews' conclusion in 1910 as to Johnson's standing as a critic: "His authority as a critic -- and it is only as a critic that he has any claim to authority -- is now thoroly [sic] discredited."[11] Widespread as it was, however, the point of view expressed by Matthews and the others cited does not tell the whole story. Despite the scorn of the Romantics and their followers, Johnson continued throughout the nineteenth century to find a few supporters who were willing to defend his criticism in print, more often than not with a notable lack of deference to the opinion of the majority.

For an insight into Johnson's reputation in the early years of the nineteenth century, we are able to draw again upon a valuable recent study, Doris Iris George's "Samuel Johnson and the Journals of the Romantic Period:

His Reputation as a Literary Critic."[12] Miss George offers an impressive body of evidence to support her contention that Johnson was neither ignored nor -- as Macaulay would have us believe -- scorned by the journals of these years. Although it is true that Johnson's name did not crop up so often as it had during the years immediately following his death, Miss George tells us that, "in the face of new literary forms and of a new attitude toward authority and toward the function of the reviewer, his name occurred more frequently than that of any other English critic of the past or the contemporary period."[13]

To be sure, there were a few outright rejections of Johnson's criticism, and most of the journal writers censured him for the same alleged shortcomings for which he had been belabored by the reviewers of his own day; he was said to be prejudiced, particularly toward Milton and Gray, he was said to be insensitive of eye and ear to the subtler beauties of nature and versification, and, more significantly, he was accused of misrepresenting the nature of genius in the Life of Cowley and of failing to respond to the most imaginative passages of Shakespeare, Milton, Collins, and Gray with the proper degree of appreciative enthusiasm.[14] But his Shakespeare criticism was almost universally praised for its attack on the unities, and for his astuteness in interpreting the motives and passions of Shakespeare's characters.[15] As for the Lives of the Poets, Miss George states that, despite the objections offered to his treatment of Milton and Gray, "the

most important conclusion is that throughout the period, with few exceptions, the general critical excellence of the work was recognized."[16] Specifically, Johnson was praised for his discussion of metaphysical poetry in the Life of Cowley and for his criticism of Dryden and Pope.[17]

Miss George's conclusion is sufficiently close to our purpose to be quoted in some detail:

> Actually, very few of the reviewers followed the example of Coleridge, whose policy was one of accepting absolutely nothing of Johnson's criticism. . . . The general tone was that of an effort to determine what part of his criticism was still valid and useful to them and what part must be rejected. Since the tendency of the period was toward an appreciative criticism rather than a criticism involving an evaluation of merits and faults, it was discovered that more attention was directed to the negative than the positive portions of his opinions. The praise he awarded was for the most part accepted as a matter of course, but unfavorable comments were meticulously weighed. This attitude accounts for the fact that the general criticism of the Preface to Shakespeare and the Lives of the Poets was favorable at the same time that qualifications were defined.[18]

In short, what the reviewers did not do was treat Johnson's judgments on books with indiscriminate contempt, and Miss George seems justified in her conclusion that it was Macaulay who was out of step insofar as the journals were concerned.[19]

The position of the journals -- that of strong if qualified approval -- is also reflected in other contemporary statements on Johnson's criticism.

For example, Nathan Drake complained in 1809 that Johnson's edition of Shakespeare was something of a disappointment and noted that Milton was the only poet dealt with in the Lives "who can lay claim to a true sublimity of conception, and an inexhaustible storehouse of imagery."[20] However, although he regretted that Johnson's "relentless prejudices" precluded a higher evaluation, his final estimate of Johnson was nevertheless one which any critic might envy:

> That he is entitled, in the most honourable sense of the term, to the appellation of a CRITIC, those who shall merely peruse his Preface to Shakespeare, and his Lives of Cowley, Dryden, and Pope, will probably not deny. Since the days of Quintillian, indeed, no better specimens of criticism than these have been given to the world.[21]

A few years later, the Rev. Francis Wrangham also noted Johnson's lack of appreciation for the highly imaginative in literature and pointed out that his Shakespeare had suffered owing to the editor's ignorance of the language and writings of Shakespeare's contemporaries; however, his praise of the Preface was generous in the extreme:

> [The edition] was ushered in by a preface written with all the powers of his masterly pen, and certainly (whether we consider the beauty and energy of its composition, the fertility of its classical allusions, the justness of its general precepts of criticism, or its accurate estimation of the excellences and the defects of his author) among the most valuable of his disquisitions. He appears in it indeed, as it has been emphatically remarked, to rival by the lustre of his praises the splendor of the original; and to follow this Eagle

> of British poetry, through all his gyres, with as keen an eye, and upon as strong a wing.[22]

As for the Lives, Wrangham admitted that although they "display occasionally the operation of strong prejudices both in political and poetical respects . . . the volumes contain, indeed, a body of criticism, which for acuteness and elegance will probably never be surpassed."[23]

Writing in 1825, Sir Edgerton Brydges likewise complained that Johnson "had none of the more minutely tremulous perceptions, none of that ineffable sensibility to the most happy touches of perfect art in finished poetry," and admitted that it had taken him many years to overcome his anger owing to Johnson's treatment of Collins and Gray.[24] But he concluded that Johnson's criticism at its best was such that "no one can break it, compete with it, or diminish its value."[25] As examples of Johnson's best work, Brydges cited the Lives of Milton and Cowley:

> Nothing in all the criticism of the world was ever written more profound, more just, more vigorous, or more eloquent, than that which he has given on Paradise Lost -- nothing so new, so acute, so exquisitely happy, as that on metaphysical poetry.[26]

In the same year, the Rev. T. F. Dibden asserted that Johnson's Preface belonged with every edition of Shakespeare, despite the fact that "there is . . . a considerable number of well read Shakespearians who are far from bowing with unqualified submission to all the critical canons it contains."[27] Dibden recommended that the Lives of the Poets be read at least

once every three years and pointed to Johnson's critique on Paradise Lost as "one of the most masterly performances of the human intellect."[28] Moreover, he believed that the Lives of Dryden and Pope embodied "some of the happiest specimens of Johnson's powers of narrative and criticism."[29] Johnson also received high praise in an 1829 episode of Noctes Ambrosianae, in which "Christopher North" assured his shepherd companion that Samuel Johnson, although insane, was nevertheless a gifted critic:

> Show me a critique that beats his on Pope, and on Dryden -- nay, even on Milton; and hang me if you may not read his essay on Shakespeare even after having read Charles Lamb, or heard Coleridge, with increased admiration of the powers of all three, and of their insight, through different avenues.[30]

Toward the middle of the century, Lord Brougham, who admitted to finding the Rambler deadly dull in form and content, found much to commend in Johnson's criticism. One quality singled out for praise was Johnson's courage in taking on Shakespeare:

> The boldness with which his many critical objections were offered, deserves not the less praise that Shakespeare's numberless and gross faults are easy to discern; because, in presence of the multitude, one might say, even of the English nation at large, their obvious nature and considerable magnitude has never made them very safe to dwell upon.[31]

Lord Brougham clearly considered the Lives of the Poets to be Johnson's greatest work, however, and cited the Lives of Dryden, Pope, and Cowley

as the best examples of his "historical genius [and] critical acumen."[32] Of the Life of Dryden he observed: "Nothing especially can be finer or more correct than the estimate of his prose style, and the concluding summary of his general merits as a poet particularly, is not only full, but composed with a simplicity and elegance."[33] The "masterly dissertation upon metaphysical poetry" in the Life of Cowley earned Lord Brougham's highest accolade, however:

> Johnson's "Essay" is . . . admirable in every particular: full of sound remarks, eloquently composed, sparkling with wit, rich in illustration, and, above all, amply attaining its object, by giving a description of the thing, the subject-matter, at once faithful and striking. It must certainly be placed at the head of his writings.[34]

Lord Brougham also argued that Johnson had been too severely censured for prejudice in the Life of Milton:

> That he had strong prepossessions against Milton's political opinions, cannot be doubted; but it is extremely incorrect to affirm, as has too generally been affirmed, that this feeling made him unfair to that great poet's merits. No one can read his criticism on "Paradise Lost" without perceiving that he puts it next to the Iliad, and in some respects on an equal, if not a higher, level. . . . His objections are not at all groundless: and although to the lesser pieces he may not be equally just, it is certain that except to the "Lycidas" he shews no very marked unfairness, while, in observing the faults of others, he largely commemorates their beauties.[35]

In concluding his discussion of the Lives, Lord Brougham made an observa-

tion which most modern scholars would accept as valid: "The 'Life of Swift,' which, as a piece of biography, stands high in the collection, is disfigured by more prejudice than any other."[36]

At least one reviewer concurred with Lord Brougham's estimate of Johnson's merits as a critic. Writing in the Dublin Review in 1847, this anonymous commentator observed that the fourth edition of Johnson's Shakespeare, prepared "under the supervision of his co-operator, George Stevens . . . was pronounced, and by many is still esteemed, the best of our great dramatist."[37] With specific reference to Macaulay's unflattering comparison of Johnson and Rymer, the reviewer said:

> Johnson's concise reviews are more truly critical than most of those effusions of unqualified and indiscriminate admiration, into which the prevalent and overpowering enthusiasm inspired by the name of Shakespere betrays, we cannot say his critics, but his eulogists.[38]

The reviewer agreed with Lord Brougham that the Lives of the Poets was "the . . . best of [Johnson's] literary performances . . . notwithstanding Campbell's and Wordsworth's expressed disfavour of the work."[39] He likewise argued that Johnson had been too severely censured for prejudice:

> That Johnson was unjust to Swift and Gray, to the former even as a prose writer, cannot be denied; but collectively he presents an impartial, perhaps even overfavourable estimate of each poet's distinctive merits. Viewed in comparison with the analogous publications of continental Europe, the work may not shrink from a parallel with those of La Harpe, Chénier, Ginguéné, Tiraboschi, Feyjio,

> Andres, Eichorne, Schlegel, and others; nor would the adjudged result be to its disadvantage.[40]

Support of a somewhat more qualified sort was voiced in the eighteen-forties by the Rev. Henry Francis Cary. Although he chided Johnson for his conclusion that Shakespeare had lost the world for a quibble, Cary found great merit in the Preface: "At the beginning . . . he has marked the character of our great dramatist with such power of criticism, as there was perhaps no example of in the English language. Towards the conclusion, he has, I think, successfully defended him from the neglect of what are called the unities."[41] Turning to the Lives of the Poets, Cary offered the familiar nineteenth century complaint that Johnson's "criticisms . . . often betray either the want of a natural perception for the higher beauties of poetry, or a taste unimproved by the diligent study of the most perfect models."[42] In the end, however, Cary adopted a stratagem which, as suggested earlier, was to become a commonplace of nineteenth century commentators on Johnson -- the notion that Johnson wrong was somehow more acute than others right:

> In his very errors as a critic there is often shewn more ability than in the right judgments of most other. When he is most wrong, he gives us some good reason for his being so. He is often mistaken, but never trivial and insipid.[43]

Ironically, Cary turned Johnson's own guns against him in the matters of blank verse and the pastoral. Since these things had pleased many and pleased long, Cary suggested that Johnson should have been wise enough to

recognize that his lack of appreciation probably stemmed from his own deficiencies of eye and ear.[44]

It should also be noted that, during the first half of the nineteenth century, Johnson enjoyed a modicum of support on this side of the Atlantic -- more, in fact, than he would see again for over a hundred years. In 1832, W. B. O. Peabody designated criticism as the "field in which [Johnson's] splendid powers appeared to the best advantage," and praised both the courage and critical acumen of the Preface to Shakespeare: "His Preface . . . , in which he fearlessly assaulted a feeling second in strength only to religious reverence . . . [shows] how every subject was illuminated, when he held it in the concentrated light of his mind."[45] Peabody was no less generous in his praise of the Lives:

> The Lives of the Poets has been by far the most popular of his works, and is doubtless the one for which he will be most reverenced in future times. It afforded room for the display of every kind of talent: of his critical sagacity, his burning imagination, his learned research, and that memory by which he retained many curious anecdotes and traits of character, which would have otherwise been lost.[46]

That Johnson was sometimes led into error through prejudice, Peabody readily agreed; however, he posed a pointed question on this score: "How was it reasonable to expect, that he should follow the prejudices of others in preference to his own?"[47] Samuel Griswold Goodrich, as "Peter Parley," likewise praised the Preface to Shakespeare as "equal to anything of the kind ever

produced"[48] and concluded that "it was indeed in his criticism that [Johnson] chiefly excelled, though his captious humor led him generally to disparage all modern productions."[49] John Frost, writing at the turn of the half-century, was somewhat less enthusiastic. He complained that Johnson "wanted that delicate perception and deep knowledge of the workings of the passions which were necessary" for criticism, but conceded that his Preface had great merit and that the Lives, albeit colored by prejudice, contained "much sound criticism."[50]

All in all, the foregoing comments reflect an attitude toward Johnson's criticism which is strongly favorable and notably free -- with the possible exception of those of the Rev. Cary -- of the influence of the great Romantic critics. To be sure, the commentators cited are few in number; but not many would be required to cast doubt on the prevailing twentieth century notion that Johnson the critic was universally ignored or condemned throughout the nineteenth century. He clearly had at least a few supporters throughout the first half of the century, and, as we shall see, he seems to have gained strength steadily in the fifty years which followed.

A prominent landmark in the growth of Johnson's reputation in the second half of the century seems to have been the publication in 1854 of Peter Cunningham's edition of the Lives of the Poets.[51] An anonymous reviewer in Bentley's Miscellany welcomed the edition with the remark that "We have now, for the first time since Johnson's death, a well-edited edition of his

masterpiece."[52] Although the reviewer conceded that some of Johnson's critical opinions were now generally discounted, he nevertheless insisted that it was universally recognized that Johnson had "occasionally laid down maxims which are good for all time." Indeed, he suggested that even the discounted judgments were probably more widely admired than the fashionable but less lively judgments of more recent writers. The reviewer explained this paradox by pointing to Johnson's unswerving insistence that truth is the basis of all excellence, a maxim which in his opinion explained "better than a thousand criticisms the hold that Johnson has on the minds and affections of his countrymen."[53]

Turning to the contents of the new edition, the reviewer remarked the excellence of the Lives of Dryden and Pope and singled out the Life of Cowley for special praise owing to the discussion of metaphysical poetry, "a criticism which is in itself a tribute to [Johnson's] love of the natural and true, and containing incidentally some fine maxims."[54] Furthermore, the reviewer was even willing to defend Johnson's judgment of Milton against charges of prejudice, if not against those which placed the subtler beauties of the minor poems beyond his ken:

> Much has been said of the want of appreciation discovered by this great critic of Milton's genius; but, if carefully read, this charge will scarcely stand, for it is the theologian and politician which Johnson dislikes. Of the poet he admits that there can be no question; and, indeed, we may look around in vain for a finer criticism in a condensed shape of the

> "Paradise Lost," than that which proceeded from his pen. It is true that he is not similarly prodigal of praise in the case of Milton's other productions; that he forgets to mention the "Hymn to the Nativity," a sublime effort, full of choice imagery, and through which there is a sacred vein, which purifies and wonderfully heightens the interest of the poem. He just alludes to the "L'Allegro" and the "Penseroso," and one is tempted to believe that the airy beauty of these gems was not fully appreciated by the solid Doctor. But the treatment which the "Paradise Lost" has received at the hands of Johnson, should surely rescue him from the charge of being blind to Milton's genius.[55]

Writing a year later in the New Monthly Magazine, "Sir Nathaniel," clearly under the sway of Romantic ideas about poetry, was not so certain that Cunningham's edition of the Lives was a blessing to an age which, in his opinion, had rejected Johnson's ideas in toto:

> His criticisms are of the eighteenth century, and it is now the nineteenth, and the better half of that too gone. To the nineteenth century belong poetical tastes of profounder sensibility, and critical judgments of more subtle scrutiny, nobler aspirations, finer sympathies, deeper searchings of heart, than to its predecessor.[56]

After expressing a good many more reservations of a similar nature, Sir Nathaniel finally concluded that dissenting nineteenth century readers would benefit from exposure to Johnson's obsolete ideas. He justified this conclusion with a familiar equivocation:

> [E]ven when wrong, [Johnson] is still sagacious and penetrating, and the reader never loses the presence of a clear intellect. A reflective reader will find in-

> comparably more enjoyment and instruction, in following, under protest, the lead of a masculine mind, devious and astray though the route may be, than in keeping up with, and potentially outrunning and "preventing," a common-place writer of sympathies and convictions accurately en rapport with his own.[57]

What clearly troubled Sir Nathaniel was the problem which, as suggested at the outset, Johnson presented to anyone dominated by the criticism of the great Romantics. In order to grant Johnson a place of respectability in the realm of criticism, such a person had to admit the inadmissable -- that there was an important relationship between good sense and poetry. Sir Nathaniel solved the problem by conferring the title of honorary poet on the writers Johnson dealt with in the Lives:

> Where understanding alone, Mr. Cunningham contends, is sufficient for poetical criticism, the decisions of Johnson are generally right. Coleridge would have objected that this is just what the understanding never is sufficient for; that poetical criticism, in any sense worthy the name, is the province of something above and beyond the understanding. But allowing, if only by courtesy, that certain verse-makers of established repute are "poets," whose "poetry" is characterized in fact by a prominent and pervading exercise of the "understanding," and wholly devoid of "the light that never was on sea or shore, the consecration of the poet's dream," -- then surely Johnson was qualified to do them justice; to gauge their merits, to appreciate their several characteristics, to show wherein lay their weaknesses and wherein their strength.[58]

In the same year, George Gilfillan, ostensibly writing a review of Croker in the Eclectic Review, also made an effort to find at least a minor

place for Johnson within the framework of Romantic critical ideas:

> The name of Johnson as a critic has had a somewhat fluctuating history. Once rated too high, it is now, we think, pushed far below its level. The true way to describe his criticism is to say it is the criticism of gigantic but cramped common sense. He lacks that subtler instinct which detects minute beauties, and that recherché taste which distinguishes the secret flavors of excellence. Nor has he any principles of criticism entitled to the praise of depth, comprehensiveness, or originality.[59]

Specifically, Gilfillan found Johnson's gigantic common sense at fault in judging adversely the more fanciful efforts of Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, and Collins; but it is clear that he did not share Sir Nathaniel's conviction that the great neo-classical poets could be called poets only by courtesy:

> Probably the greatest error, after all, committed by Johnson as a critic is the prodigious liking he has to Dryden and Pope, and the preference he gives them above Young and Thompson [sic], if not above Milton and Shakspeare themselves. That Dryden and Pope were true poets, and that the latter was in many respects an exquisite artist, we dare not deny. But that in nature, in genius -- in that power which creates -- which throws out masses of molten ore -- they attain either to the measure of the author of the "Seasons" or of the "Night Thoughts," we venture, in common with most critics now, to doubt.[60]

Gilfillan designated the Lives of Dryden and Pope as the "most masterly critical essays which [Johnson's] pen ever produced";[61] he reserved his greatest praise, however, for the critique on Paradise Lost. Because it came from the pen of an enemy, this evaluation reached the sublime, in Gilfillan's opinion: "Not to be compared critically with some other tributes, morally

it excels them all."[62]

The Rev. Whitwell Elwin, writing a few years later in the Quarterly Review, was far less apologetic. Although he, too, was primarily concerned with reviewing a new edition of Croker's Boswell, he nevertheless found room for a strong defense of Johnson's criticism, as well as for a few pungent remarks on Johnson's nineteenth century detractors. Since the quality of Elwin's indignation is as important to our purpose as the substance of his remarks, his statement is quoted at some length:

> [T]o hear the language, which is sometimes used, it might be supposed that [the Lives of the Poets] were an ignominious failure -- a collection of blind prejudices and false decrees, which only exhibit his defective taste and dictatorial insolence. The sole ground of this absurd idea is that he did not admire sufficiently the minor poems of Milton, the "Castle of Indolence" of Thomson, and the Odes of Collins and Gray. There have always been two schools of poetry -- one which addresses itself to the imagination, the other to the reason. Few persons are possessed of the catholic taste which relishes both. Johnson belonged to the school of reason, and had little appreciation of rural images and the flights of fancy. Those who have attacked him for his insensibility did not perceive that their own was greater: that if they applauded what he condemned, they likewise condemned what he applauded, and that he did not depreciate a few of their favourite pieces so much below their real level as they themselves underrated the works of Dryden and Pope. No injustice committed by him approaches the injustice with which he has been treated. The parts of his book which are open to exception are only a fraction of the whole; the bulk of it consists of criticism which for acuteness of discrimination, warmth of praise, justness of censure, and force of expression

> is still unrivalled. No one has discoursed of "Paradise Lost" with such splendour of eulogy and a nicer sense of its grandeur and defects. No one has approached him in the combination of truth and power with which he has written upon Dryden, Addison, and Pope. No one has ever produced a more masterly analysis than that in which he takes to pieces the conceits of Cowley, and shows their talent on the one hand and their radical faults upon the other. There is not a single book in the whole range of English literature which contains so many original and irreproachable canons of criticism, or which could be of equal assistance to students in forming their taste and directing them in the enlightened perusal of the best models from the end of the seventeenth century to the middle of the eighteenth.[63]

Although they were perhaps not willing to go quite so far as Elwin in defending Johnson, there were at least two commentators in the eighteen-sixties who found much to commend in his criticism, and on similar grounds. The first is the anonymous reviewer of Cunningham who was cited in the first chapter for his opening observation that "Scarcely any book written a century ago enjoys greater popularity now than Johnson's Lives of the Poets."[64] The reviewer was sufficiently imbued with Romantic ideas to acknowledge that Johnson was inferior to Coleridge in the highest department of criticism -- that "in which the critic shows his appreciation of authors whom he thoroughly admires, and connects the particular views of the author whom he is studying with a general system of morals."[65] But he went on to point out that the critic is obliged to do more than appreciate his subject:

> Much the greater part of criticism consists in applying common sense to decide on the value of what has been written, and in stating the result in a telling style. In this department of criticism Johnson is unrivalled, and so far his criticising must remain a permanent model to all English critics.[66]

Moreover, the reviewer asserted that even in the higher realm of appreciative criticism Johnson had much to say to the nineteenth century:

> He was far too generous not to praise heartily when he praised at all, and everything he praises would be praised in these days for the exact qualities he finds in it to approve. He is far too good a critic to be always sneering. Nothing can be warner and more unreserved than his panegryic on Dryden's Odes and Pope's Rape of the Lock. But he did not care much for the very highest poetry, and he had none of the metaphysical analysis which Coleridge worked with so much subtlety a few years later.[67]

The second commentator, George Ross, made more or less the same point about the business of criticism. He was willing to concede not only that Johnson was deficient in poetic feeling, but that the deficiency constituted a handicap in his Milton criticism; he went on to argue, however, that poetic feeling is not the only criterion of critical excellence:

> His judgment on everything outside that sanctuary [i.e. the recesses of the poet's mind] was incomparable, his perception was keen, his discrimination just, his conclusions undeniable. He had the wisdom of the sage, but he was without the sensitiveness of the poet; and we must judge him by what he was, not by what he was not. . . . Notwithstanding these objections, it should be remembered that literary criticism must be limited chiefly

> to the exhibition of the laws of grammar, of construction, and the peculiarities of form. Writing is an art, and as an art it must be reviewed. After we have approved or condemned a sentiment there is not much to be said about it. The perception is a matter of feeling. The mode in which the sentiments are presented to the mind -- the art, in fact, of the composer -- is the main subject of criticism. Hence only can its canons be educed, and within this sphere only can they have any application. For this reason most of our greatest critics are of the Johnsonian type.[68]

The modern notion that Johnson had no currency as a critic in the nineteenth century is one that had clearly never entered Ross' mind. His discussion begins with the observation that "Johnson's reputation as a critic stands deservedly high" albeit not so high as it had in his own day.[69]

It has been obvious that most of the favorable comments on Johnson's criticism during the latter half of the nineteenth century were concerned with the Lives of the Poets; indeed, most of them were evoked by new editions of the Lives. There is at least some indication, however, that Johnson's Shakespeare criticism likewise was not forgotten during the period. For example, George Gilfillan, in the essay cited above, admitted that Johnson was deficient in judging Shakespeare's delicacy and grace, but he suggested that no critic was better able than Johnson to cope with Shakespeare's power:

> It was, as in reference to Milton -- the might of Shakespeare he admired -- that power he possessed over the passions -- the grasp he

> takes of the broader elements of human nature -- his resemblance to a Genie of the "Arabian Nights," in his swiftness and supernatural strength, that called up blood into Johnson's faded cheek and fire into his dim eye. . . . When he came down from this general estimate of the demoniac force that was Shakespeare, and of its stupendous results, to the examination of particular plays, and the dissection of particular characters, he was less successful. It was with his mental as with his bodily eyesight. He saw great broad outlines, but not minute details.[70]

The Rev. Whitwell Elwin expressed approval of a more comprehensive sort. Although noting that Johnson, despite his promise to do so, had "neither read the old books nor was particularly nice in the comparison of old copies," Elwin nevertheless concluded that "his text was the purest which had hitherto appeared."[71] Elwin also found much merit in the model "conciseness and perspicuity" of the Notes, and more particularly in the Preface:

> His famous preface has never been relished by those whose idolatry of Shakespeare overpowers their judgment, and who canonise his faults out of admiration for his beauties. Exceptions may be taken to one or two of Johnson's positions, and he has certainly not done justice to the poetical side of his author's character; but he praises him to the height of his greatness as a delineator of nature, and in language which, though sometimes redundant, is still magnificent. But the crowning excellence of the preface is the passage in which he refutes the accepted dogma that unity of time and place was essential to dramatic probability, and by pushing the principle upon which the assumption rests to its extreme

> consequences, shows, with invincible logic and poignant wit, that it was not only false, but ridiculous.[72]

Somewhat later, J. Parker Norris offered an appraisal of Johnson's Shakespearean endeavors which was less favorable but still far from condescending. Noting that it was fortunate that Johnson's reputation did not depend on his edition of Shakespeare, which as a whole was "not worthy of so great a man as he undoubtedly was,"[73] Norris nevertheless found something to commend in the Preface:

> A preface of seventy-two pages follows the second title-page in the first volume, and is undoubtedly the best part of the work. It is exceedingly well written, and few writers on Shakespeare have produced a better essay than Johnson's preface. His criticisms on the editors who preceded him in editing the poet are, on the whole, very just, and he clearly points out the merits and faults of each. He is however unfair in what he says about Theobald, and somewhat too laudatory in his remarks concerning Warburton.[74]

Still later in the century, E. Walder not only recognized Johnson as a valuable if imperfect critic of Shakespeare but also designated him an important precursor of the Romantic critics on the basis of his defense of Shakespeare in the matters of mixed comedy and tragedy and the unities:

> [Johnson] admired Shakspere as far as his common-sense allowed him but no further; and of the deeper subtleties, and the stupendous greatness of his dramatic art he had no conception. Yet he understood Shakspere much better than his predecessors, and entered more into his spirit. . . . But it is Johnson's great praise

> as a Shaksperian critic that he refuted once and for all, by sturdy common-sense and invincible logic the opinion, held for so long, that Shakspere ought to have conformed to the rules of Aristotle concerning the unities of action, time and place.[75]

By far the most intriguing statement on Johnson's Shakespeare criticism during the period is that of William Cyples, who was cited in the preceding chapter for his observation that Johnson "is the only critic we have who is read from one generation to another." It should be made clear, perhaps, that Cyples specifically denied that Johnson was "a great critic in the high, original sense."[76] But he did give him credit for durability and influence:

> He is still the most generally recognized critic in our literature; true, it has not many. Earlier we ventured to say that in so far as Englishmen at all qualify their idolatry of Shakespeare, the bulk of them still take their opinion of the plays from Johnson.[77]

Although these few favorable comments could scarcely support the contention that Johnson played a dominant role in nineteenth century Shakespeare criticism, they do permit us to qualify our acceptance of D. Nichol Smith's conclusion that Johnson's edition of Shakespeare was universally scorned in the period and that his "Preface in particularly was remembered only to be despised."[78] As we have seen, at least a few writers throughout the century remembered the edition of Shakespeare and its Preface in a somewhat more favorable light.

Another important year in our consideration of Johnson's reputation as a critic in Victorian England is 1878, for it marked the publication of two books which we shall consider in some detail toward the end of this chapter: Matthew Arnold's edition of The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's Lives of the Poets and Sir Leslie Stephen's Samuel Johnson. What concerns us at this point is the wholehearted approval of Johnson's criticism which is expressed in a review of the latter volume -- along with new editions of Boswell and Rasselas -- in an 1885 issue of the Quarterly Review. The major concern of the reviewer was Johnson's enduring appeal to his countrymen: "Whatever may be the reason, it is unquestionably true that Johnson's influence is not only an enduring one, but is probably stronger now that it has ever been since his death."[79] The reviewer went on to theorize that the reason for Johnson's strength lay in his stubborn independence of mind:

> New standards of criticism have been established, many of which would have provoked his contemptuous indignation. . . . and yet the authority of Johnson, his manner of viewing certain social and literary questions which must always retain their interest, the trenchant judgments which he made impressive by his manner of delivering and enforcing them, his mental attitude even when defending theories which would nowadays command little assent, -- all these remain with us as fresh and vigorous as ever. It would almost seem as if, in an age like our own, which can boast of little independent judgment, and is so easily swayed by the caprices of superficial

> fashion in thought as well as in literature, we were attracted by the very sense of our own weakness to the manly and vigorous independence which, even in his prejudices, never deserted Johnson.[80]

More specifically, the reviewer spoke up for Johnson's criticism in the Lives of the Poets:

> We have learned to sneer at the criticisms in the "Lives of the Poets," and a few modern schools are content to regard some of the "Lives" as too outrageous to require to be met by deliberate argument. But it would be well at the same time to remember that not one of Johnson's criticisms in those "Lives" has failed to exercise a distinct and appreciable effect on the reputation of its subject. We may dispute his conclusions; we may detect him in inaccuracy; we may see the influence of prejudice in his judgments. But no man, attempting a fair estimate of the genius of Cowley, of Milton, of Dryden, or of Swift, can afford to ignore the verdict given on each by Johnson in the "Lives of the Poets." Of how many contemporary works of criticism will the same thing be said a hundred years hence?[81]

Writing in the Gentleman's Magazine five years later, H. W. Massingham voiced a similar conclusion concerning Johnson's staying power vis à vis that of more recent English critics:

> As a critic Johnson is excellent -- intelligent, shrewd, knowing -- and his worth may be well gauged by comparing him with his contemporaries, and even with the critical school of the earlier years of the nineteenth century. He has been abused for his mistakes. What critic is without them? What about the Edinburgh Reviewers? How many of Francis Jeffrey's literary verdicts remain? I was reading an article the

> other day to show that not one was worth the paper it was written on. What will Carlyle's historical criticisms be worth fifty years hence? What are Mr. Froude's worth now? . . . Critics have built a reputation on a tithe of the sound things scattered up and down "The Lives of the Poets." Cowley's, Dryden's, and Milton's, in spite of the terrible "howler" about "Lycidas," are excellent, and as lively as a dinner-bell. Read them, and then say whether Johnson's fame as a critic was undeserved, or whether you would put him down from his literary throne.[82]

Still later in the eighteen-nineties, William Minto expressed praise of Johnson of a somewhat less enthusiastic but perhaps more substantial kind; in his Literature of the Georgian Era, Minto not only dealt with Johnson as a great and important critic, but singled out for praise two qualities which most nineteenth century critics would have denied him: those of tolerance and catholicity of taste. As proof of Johnson's tolerance, Minto cited Johnson's benign attitude toward Warton's Essay on Pope:

> No man was ever less disposed than Johnson to suppress independent criticism, however paradoxical this may seem to those who have been taught to regard him as the inflexible administrator of narrow and arbitrary critical laws. He was punctiliously conscientious in always giving a reason for his critical decisions. . . . That his reasons were always valid would be too much to claim; but they were always, except when thrown off in the caprice of conversation, the result of profound and penetrating thought, and he would be a very presumptuous critic that should lightly set them aside.[83]

More significantly, perhaps, Minto argued that Johnson's flexibility -- the catholicity of taste which enabled him to see the merits of such diverse poets as Pope, Collins, Gray, Milton, Dryden, and Shakespeare -- helped pave the way for the "splendid outburst of poetic production in a subsequent generation."[84] As proof of Johnson's flexibility and breadth of critical appreciation, Minto cited Johnson's observation that Corneille was to Shakespeare as a clipped hedge was to a forest: "This is not the language of a narrow and exclusive critic with a single eye to correctness of an artificial kind."[85]

The number of favorable references to Johnson's criticism in the first decade of the new century supports the notion that he may have been enjoying a mild revival at the time. The first item to be considered after 1900 is, of course, George Saintsbury's A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe (1900-04). Saintsbury's discussion of Johnson's criticism will be considered in some detail in a later chapter; for the moment it is sufficient to note that after discussing other English critics of the eighteenth century he turned to Johnson with the following remark: "But we must leave minorities, and come to him who is here [the great one]."[86] John Hepburn Millar's The Mid-Eighteenth Century, which appeared in 1902, needs to be considered more closely, for we shall not be returning to it. Taking exception to the prevailing estimate of the Lives of the Poets as a collection of prejudices and antiquated ideas,

Millar argued that the work was a great and still vital essay in literary criticism. Indeed, Millar can be said to have sounded the keynote for a major segment of modern Johnson scholarship:

> It is a simple and popular mode of estimating a great work of criticism to test the author's opinions by their conformity with the accepted views of our own day. We take Johnson's attack upon the metaphysical poetry of Cowley and his school, and we say, What admirable reasoning! We take his comment on Milton's Lycidas, and we say, What deplorable obtuseness! We never pause to inquire whether the ground of both judgments is not identical; and whether (as in fact is the case) they do not equally depend upon canons of sincerity which may be right or which may be wrong. What the present-day critic has to do, and shows no signs of doing, is to explain why those canons should be applicable to the work of one poet and not to that of the other. The Lives cannot be judged by elegant extracts, such as the comparison of Pope and Dryden. The teaching of the book must be gathered from a reasonable construction of the whole.[87]

The year 1903 is also of particular significance to the present discussion, for it saw the publication of D. Nichol Smith's Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare, noted a few pages earlier for its perhaps overly dour estimate of Johnson's stature as a Shakespeare critic in the nineteenth century. In the introduction to this work, Smith set out to vindicate not only the Preface to Shakespeare but Johnson's edition as a whole. In this regard, he blamed Macaulay for Johnson's poor reputation as an editor and expressed doubt that Macaulay had honestly consulted Johnson's edition

prior to labeling it worthless:

> Those who have worked with it know the force of Johnson's claim that not a single passage in the whole work had appeared to him corrupt which he had not attempted to restore, or obscure which he had not endeavoured to illustrate. We may neglect the earlier eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare, but if we neglect Johnson's we run a serious risk. We may now abandon his text . . . but, wherever a difficulty can be solved by common sense, we shall never find his notes antiquated. . . . In disputed passages he has an almost unerring instinct for the explanation which alone can be right; and when the reading is corrupt beyond emendation, he gives the most helpful statement of its probable meaning. Not only was Johnson's edition the best which has yet appeared; it is still one of the few editions which are indispensable.[88]

The periodicals of the first decade of the century also yield references to Johnson the critic which offer an interesting contrast to those of Lytton Strachey and Brander Matthews, cited early in this chapter. For example, an anonymous writer in a 1906 issue of Bookman acknowledged that Burke and Macaulay might have been right in their contention that Johnson was more gifted as a talker than as a writer, but only insofar as the general reader was concerned:

> To the student of literary criticism, Johnson stands in no need of Boswell's letters of introduction. By sole right of "The Lives of the English Poets," and the "Edition of Shakespeare," Johnson takes his place among the few really great critics of English literature. His position is secure beside Dryden, Lamb, Hazlitt, Arnold. Among the fluctuations of critical fashion, Johnson's

> work looms up as a veritable tower of strength, which still stands four-square to every wind that blows.[89]

In similar fashion, Spencer H. Scott noted in a 1909 issue of Bookman devoted entirely to Johnson that "the 'Lives of the Poets' is a classic" and that "Johnson's Shakespeare is now estimated at its true worth."[90] Even Thomas Seccombe suggested, in the same issue, that we should not be too hasty to disregard the works in favor of the man. Specifically, he expressed approval of Johnson for not cringing before Shakespeare, and observed that "as a critic he supplies a bridge between life and literature such as few men could supply."[91]

As had been the case throughout the preceding age, some authorities in the first years of the new century seemed to be drawn to Johnson almost solely on the basis of his distaste for amorphous concepts, a characteristic which had exacted the grudging admiration even of Macaulay. In his prefatory remarks to an edition of Johnson's writings which he co-edited in 1911, G. K. Chesterton hinted that Johnson had simply been too "modern" for most succeeding generations, and heartily endorsed Macaulay's observation that even at their worst Johnson's critical comments mean something:

> [Johnson] belonged to an age and school that loved to be elaborately lucid; but one must mean something to be able to explain it six times over. Many a modern critic called delicate, elusive, reticent, subtle, individual, has gained this position by say-

> ing something once which anyone could see to be rubbish if he had said it twice.[92]

Our discussion has now taken us past 1910, the year of Sir Walter Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson, which is commonly supposed to mark the starting point of the twentieth century revival of Johnson's criticism.[93] There can be no doubt, of course, that Raleigh's book occupies an honored place in modern Johnson scholarship; but the foregoing recital of favorable opinion would of itself incline one to doubt that Raleigh rescued Johnson from outer darkness. If anything, the Six Essays appears in retrospect to ride in on the crest of a mild wave of pro-Johnson sentiment. But there is additional evidence to be considered if we are to have a full understanding of the extent of Johnson's influence during the thirty-year period preceding 1910. Thus far we have cited writers who for the most part have been largely overlooked by modern scholarship and whose attitude toward Johnson seems to have been relatively free -- indeed, one might say that many of them were remarkably free -- of Romantic ideas about poetry and criticism. We turn now, however, to several Victorian and Edwardian figures who have received more attention in our day -- writers who were clearly dedicated to Romantic ideas about the transcendental powers of the poetic imagination and the ideal of appreciative criticism. In fact, some of them have been cited to support the modern view that Johnson's criticism was an object of scorn during the years indicated. A

closer reading of what these writers had to say, however, reveals an attitude toward Johnson which is far more complex than we have recognized, for although they espoused the Romantic point of view, they apparently could not, like Thomas Sergeant Perry and so many of his colleagues, dismiss Johnson's criticism as a dead issue. Therefore, although they admittedly had some unflattering things to say about Johnson's deficiencies in what they usually referred to as the highest criticism, they also struggled -- despite the logical difficulties involved -- for some means of recognizing that his criticism nevertheless had solid, even spectacular, merits.

The most prominent of these writers is, as might be expected, Matthew Arnold, and his observations on Johnson were set forth in the Preface of his 1878 edition of the Six Chief Lives from Johnson's Lives of the Poets. It will be remembered that Arnold's problem in this essay was twofold: first, he had to justify offering to the public, and more particularly to students of literature, the work of a critic who obviously did not share his own conviction that poetry was exclusively the product of the heart rather than of the wit; secondly, he had to explain why the lives of four (to him) artificial poets -- Dryden, Swift, Addison, and Pope -- were included with those of two true poets, Milton and Gray. As is well known, Arnold attempted to dispose of his difficulties by arguing that the literature of the eighteenth century could be considered on a basis

almost completely divorced from poetry and the criticism of poetry.

Arnold made it clear, of course, that the eighteenth century was not to be congratulated for its uniqueness in this respect: "Poetry, no doubt, is more excellent in itself than prose. In poetry man finds the highest and more beautiful expression of that which is in him."[94] Prose is also a necessary commodity, however, and Arnold went on to explain that England found itself at the end of the seventeenth century rich in poetry but destitute in prose. Therefore, he argued, the qualities of "regularity, uniformity, precision, balance"[95] which characterized the verse of the eighteenth century, while admittedly not the best for poetry, were to be tolerated because they were "undeniably of signal service to that which was the great want and work of the hour, English prose."[96]

More specifically, Arnold argued that Johnson's criticism deserved respect because its author had played a prominent role in the useful if relatively humble task of his age. Unfortunately, later generations have paid more attention to what Arnold had to say about the eighteenth century as an age of prose -- some would say they have paid far too much attention to this judgment -- than to what he actually said about Johnson's criticism. When he came to discuss Johnson's merits as a critic, his argument broke down, and he took refuge in a not unfamiliar paradox: Johnson was a great critic despite the fact that he did not understand true poetry. It may not be going too far to say that Arnold's words are those of a man

who is not altogether confident of his position:

> Johnson was himself a labourer in this great and needful work, and was ruled by its influences. His blame of genuine poets like Milton and Gray, his over-praise of artificial poets like Pope, are to be taken as the utterances of a man who worked for an age of prose, who was ruled by its influences, and could not but be ruled by them. Of poetry he speaks as a man whose sense for that with which he is dealing is in some degree imperfect. Yet even on poetry Johnson's utterances are valuable, because they are the utterances of a great and original man. That indeed he was; and to be conducted by such a man through an important century cannot but do us good, even though our guide may in some places be less competent than in others. Johnson was the man of an age of prose. Furthermore, he was a strong force of conservation and concentration, in an epoch which by its natural tendencies seemed moving towards expansion and freedom. But he was a great man, and great men are always instructive. The more we study him, the higher will be our esteem for the power of his mind, the width of his interests, the largeness of his knowledge, the freshness, fearlessness, and strength of his judgments.[97]

It should be emphasized at this point, perhaps, that Arnold did not present his Six Chief Lives as critical curiosities from an age of prose; he offered them, despite his uneasiness, as points de repère for students of literature -- fixed and known positions which students could fall back on in times of uncertainty. His language on this score is scarcely equivocal:

> I know of no such first-rate piece of literature, for supplying in this way the wants of the literary student, existing at all in any other

> language; or existing in our own language, for any period except the period which Johnson's six lives cover. A student cannot read them without gaining from them, consciously or unconsciously, an insight into the history of English literature and life.[98]

This is, of course, high praise, and it would seem that the expression of it by a man of Arnold's stature, despite the great smokescreen he throws out concerning the eighteenth century as an age of prose, would have made some sort of dent in the twentieth century consensus that Johnson was ignored or scorned by the Victorians as a writer and critic. Indeed, the very fact that Arnold saw fit to edit the Six Chief Lives should have counted for something.

Unfortunately, however, most modern commentators on the subject have preferred to cite the reviews which pointed to Arnold's Six Chief Lives as something of a menace to the uninitiated. That these reviews constitute powerful proof of the prevalence of Romantic critical ideas in Victorian England cannot be denied; but their inconsistent attitude toward Johnson is also instructive. For example, in the first of the reviews referred to, John Dennis was gratified to note that "the disparaging tone in which critics were accustomed to speak of Johnson as an author has given place to a more just and intelligent estimate of his powers."[99] Nevertheless, he did not consider Johnson the sort of critic to be turned loose on unsuspecting students:

> [D]espite his acute observation, his extensive knowledge, and his great critical sagacity, Johnson often failed altogether in estimating a poet's most poetical work. He had no ear for exquisite music, no soul for the verse which the singer pours forth with subtlest perception of harmony, and yet, as if with unpremeditated art. Johnson's amazing blunders in poetical criticism are familiar to all critics; but the young reader is apt to accept the judgments of such a man without question, and should at least be made to understand in what respects these judgments are narrow and one-sided.[100]

A few paragraphs later on, however, Dennis had this to say about the perpetrator of amazing critical blunders: "Within his own range . . . Johnson's criticism is admirable, and there is nothing more masterly in our critical literature than his treatment of Dryden and Pope."[101] As a matter of fact, he went further -- he ended his remarks by chiding the editor for not including the Life of Cowley for its essay on metaphysical poetry: "[I]t is indeed so good that we cannot but wish Mr. Arnold had been a little less restricted in his plan."[102]

A conflict of a far more painful sort is reflected in an essay which J. Churton Collins wrote for the Quarterly Review some thirty years later. Collins, who was cited at the end of the first chapter for his conclusion that, for better or worse, the Lives of the Poets had become a classic on the basis of their continuing appeal, argued that Johnson was a dangerous influence precisely because of his popularity. The uninitiated reader, he maintained, had no way of knowing about the defects which

"have been as disastrous to Johnson's critical reputation among those who know as they have been mischievous generally."[103] In the course of explaining Johnson's great, over-riding defect as a critic, Collins employed a comparison which seems rich in irony a half-century later: "He appears, like Aristotle, to have been abnormally deficient in imagination, in fancy, in all that is implied in aesthetic sensibility and sympathy."[104] Such a deficiency in Aristotle presumably constituted no danger to the British public; however, Collins seemed to fear that it might be otherwise with a critic who had demonstrated over the long haul that he had a solid following among common readers:

> The many do not discriminate; with them a classic is a classic, and authority is authority; and deplorable indeed it is when what is erroneous and misleading proceeds from the same source, and has the same currency assured to it, as that which is sound. . . . When Matthew Arnold, directing attention to the critical interest and educational value of the "Lives," prepared for students and general readers a selection containing, among the others the lives of Milton and Gray, but refrained from giving any commentary on the critiques of these poets, the boon he conferred was a very questionable one.[105]

Although the substance of these remarks has not escaped the notice of later scholarship, the grotesque logic underlying Collins' argument has been overlooked. Ignored also has been the towering praise for Johnson which follows a few pages later. In this regard, the transition between the serious complaint and the paean is in itself interesting, for Collins, in giving a general account of the composition and contemporary reception of the work, came to

the somewhat remarkable conclusion that Johnson had had one aim, and one aim only, in writing the Lives: to strangle the Romantic movement in the nursery. This being the case, Collins seemed to think that Johnson's defects might be regarded as strategies and relegated to a sphere of merely historical interest. What he had to say next, however, has scarcely been matched by even Johnson's most ardent admirers, earlier or later:

> But, if the chief defects and limitations of the "Lives" have an historical interest, an interest of a very different kind attaches itself to the work as a whole. Within his sphere and at his best Johnson has no superior, or perhaps it would be more correct to say no equal, in our literature at least, as a critic. That sphere was, it must be admitted, a comparatively narrow one; and, even when within it, he was not always at his best. . . . On everything submitted to him he brought to bear, when unprejudiced, sound judgment and robust good sense, combined with extraordinary natural acuteness. A logical and positive intellect incessantly occupied in analysis and generalization and enlarged and fertilised by multifarious reading and attentive observation of life, however little it may have contributed to develop the finer sensibilities and sympathies of the critic, not only furnished him with immense general stores of digested information, but with invaluable criteria. If his studies were bounded by his tastes and his inclinations, and these, early fixed, had become prematurely stereotyped, their efficacy and influence had been doubled by their very contraction; for what he had read he retained and assimilated, and on what he had made his own he exercised his judgment. Thus he applied himself to criticism with fixed principles, settled rules, and definite canons, not arbitrarily determined, but deduced from the studies to which taste and temperament inclined him -- the Latin classics and their modern disciples chiefly -- well

> weighed in the balance of his own judgment and having the sanction of common sense. Within these limits, and universally (it may be added) in what pertains, within the bounds of rhetoric, to the art of expression, his judgments are not merely sound but almost infallible.[106]

Turning back to the individual Lives, Collins continued to oscillate between the poles of exalted praise and bitter censure. The Lives of Addison, Dryden, Cowley, and Pope were lauded as masterpieces of criticism which no hand could improve.[107] At the other extreme, the Life of Milton was denounced for its blindness, particularly in reference to the remarks on Paradise Lost:

> The moment we compare his critique with such critiques, say, as those of Hazlitt and Coleridge, we perceive all the difference between the criticism of insight and the criticism of the pedant and the rhetorician, between the criticism which pierces to what is essential and of the life, and the criticism which confines itself to accidents and is of the form.[108]

Collins was even more indignant over Johnson's treatment of Gray: "[I]t is astonishing that he could have been capable of such portents of critical opacity and obliquity as his critiques of the 'Bard' and the 'Progress of Poetry.'"[109]

It may seem, of course, that Collins' review is being considered at inordinate length; but this review clearly deserves to be cited for more than isolated statements which appear to support the modern commonplace that the Victorians and Edwardians held Johnson the critic to be a dangerous influence. What is surely more revealing here is Collins' painful struggle

to achieve a unified view of a critic who in his opinion wrote infallible masterpieces in one area of literature and unforgiveable heresies in another. Understandably, his efforts were no more successful than those of Arnold before him, and they terminated in the same basic paradox:

> But with all its limitations and defects, the "Lives of the Poets" is a great work. There is no mistaking its note, it is the note of a classic. . . . As a contribution to criticism, the least that can be said for it is that, on the poetry and polite literature characteristic of the eighteenth century, and on the writings of the early fathers of that literature, it is an indispensable and imperishable commentary; that even where it is misleading and unsound, it is yet instructive; and that there is no book in our language which, to a critical education, would contribute so much which is furthering and so much which is illumining.[110]

Once again, this is high praise, and a strange conclusion in an essay which, like that of Matthew Arnold, has been cited in our day to prove that Johnson's criticism had no influence in the period we have been looking at here. Considered in their entirety, these essays can be said to support the opposite point of view, for they reveal that Johnson's influence on Arnold and Collins was far from slight.

Sir Leslie Stephen presents us with a somewhat less complicated witness, for his comments on Johnson's criticism are not nearly so schizoid as those noted above; however, they do reflect more of a conflict than has been generally recognized. For example, his observation that

Johnson's "criticism is that of a school which has died out under the great revolution of modern taste"[111] has been more widely noted than his obvious reservations about the validity of the new school, "which would rather seem to imply that philosophical power and moral sensibility are so far disqualifications to the true poet."[112] In short, Stephen seemed willing to go along with the Romantics in a general way but not to the point of denying altogether Johnson's "excessive attention to the logical solidarity and coherence of . . . sentiments" in poetry:

> Johnson errs in supposing that his logical tests are at all adequate; but it is, I think, a still greater error to assume that poetry has no connexion, because it has not this kind of connexion, with philosophy. His criticism has always a meaning, and in the case of works belonging to his own school a very sound meaning. When he is speaking of other poetry, we can only reply that his remarks may be true, but that they are not to the purpose.[113]

As a "delicious example of the wrong way of applying strong sense to inappropriate topics,"[114] Stephen summarized Johnson's critique on Lycidas; but he did not seem anxious to explain precisely why Johnson was wrong, or to ally himself with Johnson's more vociferous assailants:

> This is of course utterly outrageous, and yet much of it is undeniably true. To explain why, in spite of truth, Lycidas is a wonderful poem, would be to go pretty deeply into the theory of poetic expression. Most critics prefer simply to shriek, being at any rate safe from the errors of independent judgment.[115]

Writing at the turn of the century, Caroline F. E. Spurgeon reflected a similar concern about the applicability of logic to Lycidas:

> Nothing can be more silly, from the prosaic point of view, than to tell "how one god asks another god what is become of Lycidas, and how neither god can tell." Most readers of this forcible and lively criticism must feel that in the frame of mind into which Johnson leads them, they cannot fail to agree with what he says. But in doing so, they feel also, that they have entirely failed to appreciate all that is valuable and all that is beautiful in "Lycidas."[116]

But Miss Spurgeon was no more willing that Arnold, Collins, or Stephen to reject Johnson's criticism entirely, despite the fact that "his lack of imagination and poetic feeling . . . debar him from entering into 'the very spirit and soul of fine writing.'"[117] In justifying her position, Miss Spurgeon followed a line of argument which we have encountered before; she explained that the critic, after all, had duties apart from the spirit and soul of fine writing. In the first place, he had writing of a less exalted nature to judge, and Miss Spurgeon maintained that no one could be more competent than Johnson to estimate the merits of such literary craftsmen as Dryden, Pope, and Addison.[118] In the second place, the critic was often required to explain as well as judge, and, as proof of Johnson's competence in this area, Miss Spurgeon pointed to the Life of Cowley:

> The reason [the dissertation on metaphysical poetry] is so valuable is that Johnson's sound

> sense, just discrimination, and forcible language are here applied in the right direction. He has a certain class of poetry to deal with, and his object is not to compare it with fixed standards and pass sentence upon it, but to explain and convey to his readers its characteristics and peculiarities. He is, in short, an interpreter, and not a judge. The result is admirable. We have a piece of criticism which is of value for all time.[119]

Valuable as the functions were, however, and despite her conviction that "not one of his criticisms has failed to exercise an appreciable effect on the reputation of its subject,"[120] Miss Spurgeon obviously felt compelled to deny Johnson a place with the great critics on the grounds of his aesthetic insensibilities; however, the point is that she could not reject him in toto, despite the fact it caused her some embarrassment to be found in his company. In the end, of course, she resorted to the familiar equivocation:

> He was, as we have seen, deficient, in much that is necessary for the highest kind of critic. With no other writer would the perverse and wrong headed criticisms be tolerated, which are found in [the Lives of the Poets]. Yet, because they are the genuine expression of his mind, because he gives clear logical reasons for his opinions, they must be treated with respect and attention, no matter how widely we may disagree.[121]

The last writer we will consider in the category of those who attempted to reconcile Johnson's criticism with Romantic ideas is John Bailey, whose Dr. Johnson and his Circle apparently has the distinction

of embodying the last major attempt anyone was to make at effecting that difficult compromise. At first glance the most remarkable thing about Bailey's book seems to be its date, for it was published in 1913, three years after Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson and in the same year in which T. E. Hulme was apparently reaching his famous conclusion that "a period of exhaustion seems to me to have been reached in romanticism."[122] It is clear from his approach to Johnson's criticism, however, that Bailey had not been oppressed with the idea that Romantic criticism was nearing the end of the line. Like others cited earlier, Bailey set out to argue that Johnson's criticism deserved respect despite the fact that "it is not going too far to say that of the highest possibilities of poetry he had no conception."[123]

It should be pointed out that Bailey's conception of the highest possibilities of poetry was one which makes that of Lytton Strachey, quoted earlier, seem positively phlegmatic:

> It is a measure of the distance we have travelled away from Johnson that even plain people to-day, if they care for poetry at all, find much more in it than a piece of cunning craftsmanship. It is always that no doubt: but for us today it is also something far higher: a symbol of eternity. And more than a symbol, a sacrament: for it not only suggests but reveals: it is the truth which it signifies; itself a part, as all those who have felt its influence are assured, of the eternal order of things to which it points. Plainly, then, some of the things which now seem to be of the innermost

> essence of poetry are not the things which can be weighed in any scales known to Johnson.[124]

Needless to say, Bailey's view of the poet as prophet made it difficult for him to reconcile himself to Johnson's practice of reviewing the works of even so great a poet as Shakespeare "with the confidence of a schoolmaster looking over a boy's exercise."[125] Like some of the other critics discussed, however, Bailey seems to have been troubled by the suspicion that criticism needed to do more than rejoice in the poet's moments of ecstatic communion with the great beyond:

> After all poetry is an art as well as an inspiration: it may almost be said to be a business as well as a pleasure. There is still, when all has been said, that indispensable alloy of prose in its composition without which it crumbles into fragments, or evaporates into mere mist. The critical questions which Horace and Boileau and Pope discuss do not include the highest; but they include much that no poet can put aside as beneath him. In this field Johnson ranks among the masters of criticism. His mind did not travel outside its limits, but to the work to be done within them it brought knowledge, reflection, vigour, and acuteness.[126]

In retrospect, of course, it is easy to shrug Bailey off as a man who was trying desperately to solve a problem which the passage of time had rendered largely obsolescent; however, Bailey's difficulties, as well as those of J. Churton Collins examined earlier, offer eloquent proof -- if proof is needed -- that the ideas of the Romantics continued to exert a powerful influence in the first decade of the new century. Indeed, as we

shall see in the next chapter, the view that criticism had reached its highest perfection in the achievement of the English Romantics seems to have had a more deleterious effect on Johnson's reputation in the years between 1910 and 1940 than it had been able to achieve in the preceding century. Granted this continuing dominant influence, it is possible to argue that Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson is more notable for its attack on Romantic criticism than for its defense of Johnson.[127] As we have seen, there had always been a few writers who were willing to defend Johnson's criticism without obeisance to the great Romantics; and there had also been a few who were clearly in the sway of Romantic ideas but who nevertheless managed to recognize that Johnson had important merits as a critic.

In Raleigh, however, we encounter something new, and one suspects that much of the contemporary impact of his Six Essays on Johnson inhered in the fact that it embodied an attack on the basic assumptions of the erstwhile literary Establishment by one of the Establishment's more important members. It will be remembered that Raleigh's forecast of a twentieth century Johnson revival was based on his conclusion that Romantic criticism had outlived its usefulness:

> The romantic attitude begins to be fatiguing. The great romantic critics, when they are writing at their best, do succeed in communicating to the reader those thrills of wonder and exaltation which they have felt in contact with Shakespeare's imaginative work. This is not a little thing to do; but it cannot be done continuously, and it has furnished

> the workaday critic with a vicious model. There is a taint of insincerity about romantic criticism, from which not even the great romantics are free. They are never in danger from the pitfalls that waylay the plodding critic; but they are always falling upward, as it were, into vacuity. They love to lose themselves in an O altitudo. From the most worthless material they will fashion a new hasty altar to the unknown God. When they are inspired by their divinity, they say wonderful things; when the inspiration fails them their language is maintained at the same height, and they say more than they feel. You can never be sure of them.[128]

Admittedly, it is drawing a fine distinction to differentiate between a defense of Johnson's criticism and an attack upon the principles of that criticism's nineteenth and early twentieth century detractors, but Stuart Teggart seems to have made precisely this distinction in remarks on Raleigh's book which appeared in a 1913 issue of the Westminster Review. Teggart agreed with Raleigh that Romantic criticism had begun to pall and chided Raleigh for the timidity of his attack on it:

> The time is not indeed fully ripe for the new viewpoint [on Johnson's criticism], but the task is not so much to change popular opinion by defending Johnson's critiques, as to immediately remove what is nothing less than an invidious reputation, given by the romantic critics. First remove this stigma and the rest is easy: all around the spirit of logic and clearness is evident: men will soon sigh for the cool manly criticism of men like Dr. Johnson -- men who write with their eye on the object and who confine themselves definitely to the business at hand.[129]

As we shall see in the following chapter, sighing for the cool manly

criticism of Dr. Johnson was destined to become somewhat less audible before it finally grew louder in the years following World War II. Prior to turning our attention to Johnson's fortunes after 1910, however, it is pertinent to draw whatever conclusions we can from our discussion up to this point. The most obvious conclusion seems to be that modern reports of the disappearance of Johnson's criticism from the nineteenth and early twentieth century literary scene, like those of Mark Twain's death, have been greatly exaggerated. As we have seen, that criticism seems not only to have found readers and supporters in every generation since Johnson's death but even to have gained strength between 1875 and 1910, a period in which it is popularly thought to have been completely dormant. Indeed, some late Victorian and Edwardian writers who have been cited in our time to support the idea that Johnson's criticism was in total disgrace during the period actually went through some interesting mental gymnastics to acknowledge that he had great merits as a critic.

It should be stressed again, however, that we have been examining a minority opinion. The great majority of literary authorities in the period under consideration -- and this would include most of those figures who are commonly thought of as belonging to the best circles -- seem to have held precisely that view of Johnson's criticism which the later twentieth century has popularly attributed to them. These people assumed that Johnson's criticism had been rendered null and void by the ideas of the

Romantics, that it was no longer read, and that it properly belonged in a museum. Our mistake has been to accept at face value their estimate of Johnson's standing in their day, and, unfortunately, this error has been compounded by the studies of Robert N. Lass and William Kenney. But the foregoing discussion makes it clear that not everyone ran with the pack, at least insofar as Johnson's criticism was concerned.

Therefore, the conventional modern view of Johnson's nineteenth century reputation does stand in need of minor modification. If we may revert briefly to the image which was introduced at the outset, we can say that it should be changed as follows: Johnson's line should not vanish off the bottom of the performance chart at 1831. Instead, after a considerable decline from 1784, it should continue on a more or less level course -- admittedly close to the bottom of the chart, but clearly in view -- to 1850. From there, it should probably ascend gradually to a point perhaps a fifth of the way up at 1910. Where it should go from there is, of course, a matter to be deferred. Even as altered thus far, however, the chart can no longer reflect the spectacular ups and downs of the original, and this is possibly a matter to be regretted in an age which has not been conspicuous for playing down the dramatic element in its efforts to rehabilitate literary reputations. Nevertheless, it does seem clear that our current assumption that Johnson the critic had no following in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is not a valid one. Accordingly, we should recognize

that, if we have rescued Johnson from anyone's neglect, it is not that of the Victorians and Edwardians but rather that of our more recent predecessors of the nineteen-twenties and thirties, who seem to have been more uniformly obtuse to the merits of Johnson's criticism than the earlier writers had been. In short, there is good reason to believe that, if the year 1910 marks a turning point in Johnson's fortunes, it does not mark a turn for the better.

NOTES

CHAPTER II

[1]"Johnson's Reputation," p. 553.

[2]It should be noted, of course, that two of the major figures of the Romantic movement, Scott and Byron, were favorably disposed toward Johnson's criticism. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt, and DeQuincey, however, can only be called hostile. Johnson was Wordsworth's chief example of a bad critic, and Coleridge waged something of a holy war against the Preface to Shakespeare. It is now generally recognized, however, that both Wordsworth and Coleridge were closer to Johnson on a number of questions than they perhaps realized. T. S. Eliot, for example, has written on the Preface to Lyrical Ballads as follows: "True, Gray was overrated; but then Johnson had come down on Gray with a deadlier force than Wordsworth could exert. And Donne has seemed to us, in recent years, as striking a peculiarly conversational style; but did Wordsworth or Coleridge acclaim Donne? No, when it came to Donne -- and Cowley -- you will find that Wordsworth and Coleridge were led by the nose by Samuel Johnson." The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London, 1933), p. 72. M. H. Abrams has also explained that "In his demand that the content of poetry be what is central to all mankind, Wordsworth was at one with Boileau, Pope, and Johnson; the substitution of poetry as the overflow of feeling, however, for poetry as a pleasure-giving imitation enforced a change in the application of this criterion." The Mirror and the Lamp (New York, 1953), p. 114.

[3]The difficulty of reconciling Johnson's criticism with the new ideas about poetry is best reflected, perhaps, in the comments of two nineteenth century Americans, William H. Prescott and Dr. William E. Channing. Prescott was favorably disposed toward Johnson but complained that he analyzed poetry like a chemist: "By this kind of process, some of the finest fancies of the Muse, the lofty dithyrambics of Gray, and of Milton too, are rendered sufficiently vapid. In this sort of criticism, all the effect that relies on impressions goes for nothing. Ideas alone are taken into the account, and all is weighed in the same hard, matter-of-fact scales of common sense, like so much solid prose." Biographical and Critical Miscellanies (Philadelphia, 1864), p. 247. Dr. Channing offers an even more specific complaint about the limitations of commonsense criticism: "He did not, and could not, appreciate Milton . . . Johnson was great in

his own sphere, but that sphere was comparatively 'of the earth,' whilst Milton's was only inferior to that of the angels. It was customary, in the days of Johnson's glory, to call him a giant, to class him with a mighty, but still an earth-born race. Milton we should rank among seraphs. Johnson's mind acted chiefly on man's intellectual condition, on the realities of life, on the springs of human action, on the passions which now agitate society, and he seems hardly to have dreamed of a higher state of the human mind than was there exhibited. Milton, on the other hand, . . . thought not so much of what man is, as of what he might become. His own mind was a revelation to him of a higher condition of humanity." The Works of William E. Channing, D. D. (Boston, 1877), p. 509.

[4]Edinburgh Review, LIV (1831), 32-33.

[5]The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P. P. Howe (London, 1930), VI, 49. It should be noted that Hazlitt undertook a spirited defense of Johnson the critic on another occasion. In fact, his remarks support the contention that Johnson's criticism was more highly regarded in the nineteenth century than we have supposed. On the subject of the reception of the Lives of the Poets, Hazlitt wrote: "He was attacked on all sides for his contempt of Milton's politics, and the sparing praise or direct censure he had bestowed on the poetry of Prior, Hammond, Collins, Gray and a few others. The errors, indeed, which on any other subject might have passed for errors of judgment, were, by the irascible tempers of his adversaries, magnified into high-treason against the majesty of poetic genius. During his life these attacks were not few, nor very respectful to a veteran whom common consent had placed at the head of the literature of his country; but the courage of his adversaries was observed to rise very considerably after his death, and the name which public opinion had consecrated was reviled with the utmost malignity. Even some who during his life were glad to conceal their hostility, now took an opportunity to retract the admiration in which they had joined with apparent cordiality; and to discover faults in a body of criticism which, after all reasonable exceptions are admitted, was never equalled, and perhaps never will be equalled, for justness, acuteness, and elegance. Where can we hope to find discussions that can be compared with those introduced in the lives of Cowley, Milton, Dryden, and Pope? His abhorrence, indeed, of Milton's political conduct led him to details and observations which can never be acceptable to a certain class of politicians; but when he comes to analyse his poetry and to fix his reputation on its proper basis, it must surely be confessed that no man, since the first appearance of Paradise Lost, has ever bestowed praise with a more munificent hand. He appears to have collected his whole energy to immortalise the genius of Milton; nor has any advocate for Milton's democracy

appeared, who has not been glad to surrender the guardianship of his poetical fame to Johnson." Johnson's Lives of the Poets Completed by William Hazlitt (London, 1854), IV, 88-89.

[6]The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, VI, 49.

[7]We have previously recognized Thomas Sergeant Perry's negative appraisal of Johnson's criticism. English Literature in the Eighteenth Century (New York, 1883), pp. 403-413. Perry's opinion, expressed as Professor Bronson believes with "all the confidence of learning and leadership," seems to have its roots in the conviction that the Romantic movement had constituted a second Renaissance. A few years earlier, Charles Duke Yonge had argued that Johnson deserves attention primarily because of "the example he affords, as striking as any to be found in all our literary history, of a man without any of the higher gifts of genius, wholly destitute of imagination or fancy, or even of very correct tastes in composition, nevertheless, by unwearied industry, steadiness, and honesty of purpose, raising himself to an eminence in the literary world to which at least one of these qualities would be reckoned indispensable." Three Centuries of English Literature (Chicago, 1881), II, 175. John Bascom also chided Johnson's criticism for its "lack of emotional insight and insensitivity to inherent power" and went on to explain the deficiency in terms of Johnson's definition of genius in the Life of Cowley. In Bascom's view, Johnson had defined not genius but talent, and Bascom believed Johnson's error was unavoidable in an age which, in his opinion, had been rich in talent but devoid of genius. Philosophy of English Literature, A Course of Lectures Delivered in the Lowell Institute (New York, 1884), pp. 203-5. Maude Gillette Phillips offered comments which were even more damaging: "Belonging to the artificial and didactic school, [Johnson's] literary criticisms are of little value. . . . By him Cowley, Pope, and Waller are extolled as exemplary poets, while the poets of Nature -- Milton, Gray and Thomson -- were bitterly denounced." A Popular Manual of English Literature (New York, 1885), II, 49. William Francis Collier was no less emphatic in dismissing Johnson's criticism: "In truth, Johnson never seems to have felt the full meaning of the word 'poet.' He was himself a master of pentameter rhymes, smooth, lofty, full-sounding; and we strongly suspect that the skillful manufacture of such appeared to him the highest flight of poetic genius. If he had any poetic fancy at all, it must have been of the clumsiest and palest kind, grey with London smoke and smothered in Latin polysyllables." A History of English Literature (London, 1892), p. 348. Writing on Johnson's Shakespeare criticism almost twenty years later, Charles F. Johnson was equally convinced that Johnson had not known the meaning of the word "poet": "Johnson was not a poet, and it is only through the

poet in us that we can appreciate Shakespeare. He hated romanticism or any tendency to give an air of mystery or a tone of enthusiasm or passion to a literary representation of life." Shakespeare and His Critics (Boston, 1909), p. 114. The following year, William Trent praised Johnson's common sense but observed that common sense could not cope with true poetry. He concluded that Johnson "was not a very philosophical and acute judge of literature." Longfellow and Other Essays (New York, 1910), p. 115. In addition to his alleged deficiencies of imagination, Johnson's didacticism continued to pose a problem for writers in the early twentieth century. An anonymous reviewer in Living Age spoke of "the wide gulf which separates literary criticism in Johnson's day and our own day. Poetry was then expected to be moral and improving, and judged by that standard. Now it is not." Living Age, CLXXI (November 11, 1911), 373. But the major complaint continued to be that Johnson had not been attuned to genuine poetry. Apparently responding to Sir Walter Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson, R. Y. Tyrell discounted Johnson as a scholar, an editor of Shakespeare, and a critic of poetry: "The Lives of the Poets demanded a more delicate critical faculty than Johnson's. . . . In Johnson we have a critic who dislikes lyrical measures, who does not set much store by the reach of thought in poetry, and who, in estimating powers and degrees of literary excellence, is nearly always wrong." "Samuel Johnson: An Unbiased Appreciation," Fortnightly Review, XC (1911), 246. Andrew Lang took a somewhat kinder view of the Lives a year later, but dismissed Johnson's brand of criticism as obsolete: "[Johnson's] critical tastes and rules are not ours, and perhaps even in his own day were falling out of fashion; but they are nonetheless historically valuable." History of English Literature (London, 1912), p. 474.

[8]English Literary Criticism (London, 1896), p. lix.

[9]Books and Characters (London, 1922), p. 95. As suggested, Strachey's review reflects what seems to have been a commonplace among nineteenth and early twentieth century commentators on Johnson -- the notion that his judgments on literature, while clearly wrong and outmoded, were nevertheless meaningful and enlightening. In the somewhat more subdued Life of Johnson which he wrote for the 1856 Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macaulay said of the Lives: "The criticisms are often excellent, and, even when grossly and provokingly unjust, well deserve to be studied; for, however erroneous they may be, they are never silly. They are the judgments of a mind tramelled by prejudice, and deficient in sensibility, but vigorous and acute. They, therefore, generally contain a portion of valuable truth which deserves to be separated from the alloy; and at the very worst they mean something -- a praise to which much of what is called

criticism in our time has no pretensions." The Life of Samuel Johnson (New York, 1895), p. 65. For other expressions of the same general idea, see the following: Henry Francis Cary, Lives of the English Poets, from Johnson to Kirke White, etc. (London, 1846), p. 53; Sir Nathaniel, New Monthly Magazine, CIII (1855), 20; Quarterly Review, CLIX (1885), 148-149; Sir Leslie Stephen, Samuel Johnson (London, 1878), p. 187; Matthew Arnold, "Johnson's Lives," Essays in Criticism, third series, ed. Edward J. O'Brien (Boston, 1910), pp. 216-17; J. Churton Collins, "Dr. Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets,'" Quarterly Review, CCVII (January 1908), 72-73; Caroline Spurgeon, The Works of Samuel Johnson (London, 1898), p. 49; Henry J. Nicoll, Landmarks of English Literature (New York, 1900), p. 19; and Percy Hazen Houston, Main Currents in English Literature (New York, 1926), p. 251.

[10]Books and Characters, p. 98.

[11]Gateways to Literature (New York, 1912), p. 109.

[12]Unpubl. diss. (Louisiana State University, 1951). Miss George's study covers the period from 1800 to 1832, and is derived from the following periodicals: the Gentleman's Magazine, the Scots Magazine, the Monthly Review, the British Critic, the Edinburgh Review, the Quarterly Review, the Westminster Review, Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, the London Magazine, Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country, the Literary Gazette, the Examiner, the Indicator, the Liberal, the Literary Examiner, and the Companion. Concerning the effect of the political orientation of the journals on their attitude toward Johnson, she says: "It was not only the periodicals with avowedly conservative leanings -- the Gentleman's, the Scots, the British Critic, the Quarterly, and the Literary Gazette -- that manifested an attitude predominantly favorable to Johnson; such liberal organs as the Monthly, the Edinburgh, Blackwoods, and the London shared their approval of him. And even those periodicals evincing the most antagonism -- the Westminster, Fraser's, and the Examiner in the latter part of the period -- found occasionally in him something to commend. In other words, it cannot be said that the antagonism shown Johnson by the major figures of the Romantic period was imitated by the journals, nor can it be said that his reputation was the result of servile admiration in journals adhering to eighteenth-century neoclassical standards. His reputation transcended political and religious and literary loyalties" (p. 316).

[13]P. 311.

[14]P. 314.

[15]P. 64.

[16]P. 247.

[17]Pp. 194, 215, 174.

[18]P. 311.

[19]P. 159. It is worth noting that S. Austin Allibone had denied the validity of Macaulay's opinion eighty years prior to Miss George's study. Allibone printed Macaulay's famous statement from the 1831 review of Croker along with the more favorable estimates of Scott, Byron, Landor, Sir James MacIntosh, and others and notes: "The incorrectness of this assertion must be obvious to the reader who has perused the opinions just quoted; and it is easy for us to add to the evidence already presented of Mr. Macaulay's very grave error." A Critical Dictionary of English Literature (Philadelphia, 1871), II, 976.

[20]Essays, Biographical, Critical, and Historical, Illustrative of the Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler, etc. (London, 1809), I, 434-35. Although he cites Johnson's edition of Shakespeare as a disappointment, Drake argues that Johnson deserves great credit for laying out the plan -- e. g. the illustration of Shakespeare though a study of his contemporaries -- which enabled Steevens to produce a much more satisfactory edition (p. 387).

[21]Ibid., p. 486.

[22]The British Plutarch, Containing the Lives of the Most Eminent Divines, Patriots, Statesmen, Warriors, Philosophers, Poets and Artists, of Great Britain and Ireland, from the Accession of Henry VII to the Present Time (London, 1816), VI, 326.

[23]Ibid., p. 330.

[24]Recollections of Foreign Travel, on Life, Literature, and Self Knowledge (London, 1825), II, 147-49.

[25]Ibid., p. 147.

[26]Ibid., p. 148.

[27]The Library Companion, or, the Young Man's Guide, and the Old Man's Comfort, in the Selection of a Library (London, 1825), p. 805.

[28]Ibid., p. 521.

[29]Ibid., p. 522.

[30]Famous Reviews, ed. R. B. Johnson (London, 1914), p. 398.

[31]Lives of Men of Letters and Science Who Flourished in the Time of George III (London, 1846), II, 63-64.

[32]Ibid., p. 67.

[33]Ibid., pp. 67-68.

[34]Ibid., p. 68.

[35]Ibid., p. 70.

[36]Ibid.

[37]"Johnson, his Contemporaries and his Biographers," Dublin Review, XXIII (1847), 218.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid., p. 227.

[40]Ibid., p.228.

[41]Lives of the English Poets, from Johnson to Kirke White, Designed as a Continuation of Johnson's Lives (London, 1846), p. 36. The essay on Johnson originally appeared as "On the Life and Writings of Samuel Johnson, LLD," London Magazine, VIII (1823), 57-59, 169-85.

[42]Ibid., p. 53.

[43]Ibid., p. 88.

[44]Ibid.

[45]North American Review, XXIV (1832), 103-04.

[46]Ibid., p. 103.

[47]Ibid., p. 104.

[48]Famous Men of Modern Times (Boston, 1855), p. 104. (Copyright date: 1844).

[49]Ibid., pp. 223-24.

[50]Lives of Eminent Christians (Hartford, 1850), pp. 228-30.

[51]Cunningham viewed the Lives primarily as biography, but did not offer Johnson's criticism in an apologetic manner: "When [Johnson] fails to convince us, he always leaves us with a favorable opinion of his good sense; for even when wrong, he is still sagacious and penetrating, and the reader never loses the presence of his clear intellect. Wherever the world has dissented from his judgments, the world is still curious to preserve his opinions; and where understanding alone is sufficient for poetical criticism, the decisions of Johnson are generally right. Indeed the judgment of the world is that of Byron. 'Johnson,' writes the noble poet, 'strips many a leaf from every laurel; still Johnson's is the finest critical work extant, and can never be read without instruction and delight.'" Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets, ed. Peter Cunningham (New York, 1857), I, xxiv-xxv. In addition he provides us with an anecdote which is suggestive of Hardy's Jude and perhaps enlightening concerning the attitude of the nineteenth century public toward Johnson the man of letters: "When my father was a common stone-mason in the town in which Robert Burns died, he made his way on foot to Edinburgh, foreseeing a better outlet for his genius than his native place was likely to afford. With the characteristic prudence of his countrymen he carried money with him. His hunger and his thirst were both for books. When his labours of the day were over (he wrought in Edinburgh as a mason) he would repair to a sale-room kept by old Blackwood (afterwards eminent as a publisher), where books were sold at night by cheaper advances in price than those now in use. For three shillings and eleven pence he bought Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets' in four volumes, then comparatively a dear book. As he was carrying off his purchase, he was accosted by a gentleman who, arriving too late for the sale, offered a handsome per centage to the mason for the acquisition he was carrying delighted away. The offer was politely refused, much, as I have heard my father relate, to the surprise of the gentleman, who looked at his mason's apron and his purchase with mixed and increasing surprise. From this acquisition (gained by the sweat of the brow, in later years honoured with a better binding) my father learned much, and I have learned something. The reader who delights in biography and has any liking for the notes that follow will excuse this anecdote. To my father's cheap but highly-prized acquisition the public is mainly indebted for a good work (the Lives of the

British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects), and in that edition I first read Johnson, and determined twenty years ago to become his editor" (p. xxvii).

[52]"Johnson's Lives of the Poets," XXXVI (1854), 445.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid., pp. 445-46.

[56]CIII (1855), 19.

[57]Ibid., p. 20.

[58]Ibid., pp. 20-21.

[59]"Dr. Johnson as a Christian and a Critic," reprinted in Littell's Living Age, XLV (1855), 223. The notion that Johnson's stature as a critic was enhanced by his fame as a moralist is supported by the manner in which Gilfillan incorporated this essay on Johnson into his Galleries of Literary Portraits (Edinburgh, 1857), II, 217-26. Johnson is not listed under "Critical and Miscellaneous Writers" with Hazlitt, Lamb, Jeffrey, and Coleridge, but under "Sacred Authors" with Bunyan, Foster, Dr. Arnold, et al.

[60]Ibid., p. 226.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Ibid., p. 225.

[63]"The Life and Writings of Johnson," Quarterly Review, CV (1859), 213-14. It should be mentioned that Elwin's essay appears in expanded form in his Some XVIII Century Men of Letters (London, 1902), II, 267-445. It is certainly one of the finest of the many nineteenth century biographical treatments of Johnson. Needless to say, Elwin's concluding remarks foreshadow Arnold.

[64]"Johnson's Lives of the Poets," Littell's Living Age, LXIV (1860), 240. From the Saturday Review.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid., p. 243.

[68]Studies: Biographical & Literary (London, 1867), pp. 100-01.

[69]Ibid., p. 98. It is possible that the whole twentieth century concept of a double tradition of Dr. Johnson would have seemed strange to Dr. Ross. In discussing the attacks on Johnson which occurred at the beginning of the century, Ross concludes that they probably redounded to Johnson's benefit: "It is, perhaps, best for his reputation that he has passed through this ordeal; for all that can be said against him having been said, his fame will stand for all future time upon a surer pedestal" (p. 64). It is clear that he is not thinking of Johnson the colorful eccentric of Boswell's biography, but of Johnson the writer and public figure. In addition, it has been noted that even those nineteenth century studies which are most obviously interested in Johnson the personality identify him not as a colorful eccentric, but as "the great lexicographer and critic." "Shades of the Departed, Dr. Johnson," The Leisure Hour, November 18, 1852, p. 773. Or they identify him as "the author of the first really good English dictionary, the author of the best collection of the Lives of our English Poets, the man who almost in defiance of the law, and at the risk of a prosecution, first really called into existence the practice of reporting the Debates of Parliament." "Dr. Johnson," The Antiquarian Magazine, VI (1884), 259-60. In similar fashion, one finds random sentences in biographical accounts such as the following: "He undertook [the Lives of the Poets] with alacrity, and executed it in such a manner as must convince every competent reader, that, as a biographer and critic, no nation can produce his equal." George Godfrey Cunningham, A History of England in the Lives of Englishmen (London, 1856), VI, 128. More comments of this sort could be produced to support the view that many of the writers who are supposed to have perpetuated the popular tradition in the nineteenth century were proud rather than contemptuous of Johnson's achievements in the world of letters.

[70]"Dr. Johnson as a Christian and a Critic," p. 225.

[71]"Life and Writings of Johnson," p. 206.

[72]Ibid., p. 207. The Hill-Powell edition of the Life of Johnson offers the following quotation from the 1863 Cambridge Shakespeare: "Johnson's preface and notes are distinguished by clearness of thought and diction and by masterly common sense." See I, 497, n. 3.

[73]"The Editors of Shakespeare," Shakespeariana, III (January 1886), 30.

[74]Ibid., p. 27. Norris also noted that Johnson's edition was the first "which partook of a variorum character" (p. 29).

[75]Shaksperian Criticism Textual and Literary from Dryden to the End of the Eighteenth Century (Bradford, 1895), p. 46.

[76]"Johnson without Boswell," Contemporary Review, XXXII (July 1878), 725.

[77]Ibid., p. 724. Mr. Cyples also offers this amusing observation: "Let it be remembered that [Johnson] is the only case of a man who wrote a dictionary writing anything else that the public would read" (p. 710).

[78]Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare (New York, 1962), p. ix.

[79]"Samuel Johnson and his Age," CLIX (1885), 148.

[80]Ibid., pp. 148-49.

[81]Ibid., p. 150.

[82]"Some Johnson Characteristics," CCXVIII (1890), 161-62.

[83](Edinburgh, 1894), p. 286. Minto had commented earlier on Johnson's criticism: "The merits of his literary criticism were the result of his good sense, their defects the result of his narrow sympathies and fragmentary knowledge. He seldom or never erred on the side of extravagant praise." A Manual of English Prose Literature, Biographical and Critical (New York, 1887), p. 417.

[84]Ibid., p. 286.

[85]Ibid., p. 287.

[86](Edinburgh, 1949), II, 477.

[87](New York, 1902), p. 332.

[88]Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare, p. xxxi.

[89]"Samuel Johnson," XXX (May 1906), 55.

[90]"Dr. Johnson's Literary Work," XXXVI (September 1909), 257, 259.

[91]"Johnson," pp. 249-50. Seccombe probably deserves more than passing mention. Like so many others of his time, he was more fascinated with Johnson the hero of the Life than Johnson the writer and critic. Indeed, he seemed to regard Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson as a quasi-sacred book, and on one occasion went so far as to suggest that Johnson ranked with Falstaff and Pickwick in the hearts of English readers. "Samuel Johnson," Bookman, XXIV (1903), 125. Nevertheless, he gave Johnson some credit as a critic in his history of late eighteenth century literature: "The Lives of the Poets forms Johnson's title to rank as a great critic: it also shows us how narrow were the limits of his critical perceptions." The Age of Johnson, 3rd ed. (London, 1907), p. 14. In The Bookman Illustrated History of English Literature, which Seccombe authored in collaboration with W. Robertson Nicoll, we find comments of a less qualified sort: "No critical work in our language, perhaps, shows more native vigour than the Lives of the Poets: no book contains so many sound and original canons of criticism." (London, 1906), II, 320.

[92]G. K. C. as M. C., Being a Collection of Thirty-Seven Introductions, ed. J. P. deFonseka (London, 1939), p. 72.

[93]Raleigh's Johnson on Shakespeare, with its important introduction, had appeared two years earlier. The introductory essay is, of course, included in the Six Essays.

[94]"Johnson's Lives," p. 208.

[95]Ibid., p. 213.

[96]Ibid.

[97]Ibid., pp. 217-218.

[98]Ibid., pp. 193-94.

[99]"Dr. Johnson," British Quarterly Review, American ed., LXX (October 1879), 183.

[100]Ibid., p. 189.

[101]Ibid.

[102]Ibid., p. 190. In all fairness, it should be mentioned that Dennis felt that the Life of Gray could have been profitably omitted.

[103]"Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets,'" Quarterly Review, CCVIII (January 1908), 73.

[104]Ibid.

[105]Ibid., pp. 73-74.

[106]Ibid., pp. 85-86.

[107]Ibid., p. 94.

[108]Ibid., pp. 89-90.

[109]Ibid., p. 96.

[110]Ibid., p. 97.

[111]Samuel Johnson (London, 1878), p. 187. It should be noted that Sir Leslie had elsewhere stated somewhat more emphatically the idea that Johnson's criticism, like his politics, was woefully out of date. Hours in a Library (London, 1899), II, 25 ff.

[112]Samuel Johnson, p. 180.

[113]Ibid., p. 187.

[114]Ibid., p. 188.

[115]Ibid., p. 189.

[116]The Works of Samuel Johnson (London, 1898), p. 39.

[117]Ibid., p. 43.

[118]Ibid., p. 45.

[119]Ibid., p. 44.

[120]Ibid., p. 49.

[121]Ibid., pp. 51-52.

[122]"Romanticism and Classicism," Criticism, The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment, eds. Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, and Gordon McKenzie (New York, 1948), p. 260.

[123]Dr. Johnson and His Circle (London, 1913), p. 203.

[124]Ibid., pp. 206-207.

[125]Ibid., p. 176.

[126]Ibid., p. 225.

[127]William Kenney also stresses this aspect of Raleigh's approach: "The main significance of Raleigh for Johnsonian criticism is his attack on the romantic preconceptions that had prevailed to his day. Raleigh is the first major critic of Johnson to question the romantic faith." "The Modern Reputation of Samuel Johnson," p. 226. However, in view of the evidence presented in this chapter one may be inclined to take exception to another of Mr. Kenney's observations on Raleigh: "For the first time in over a hundred years, a significant critic took what Johnson had to say seriously" (p. 225).

[128]Six Essays on Johnson, pp. 84-85. It should be noted again, perhaps, that the essay in which these remarks appear was first published as the introduction to Raleigh's Johnson on Shakespeare, which appeared in 1908.

[129]"Dr. Johnson as a Literary Critic," CLXXX (September 1913), 291. The ironic juxtaposition of old and new ideas in Teggart's essay has been pointed out by William Kenney: "Yet the older view is too deeply ingrained in Teggart for him to get over it easily. Five pages later he tells us that Johnson 'had no patience with the yearnings and vague longings of the romantic poets; he was too gross to hear the harmony in immortal souls, too deaf to listen to the melody of the everlasting stars.'" "The Modern Reputation of Samuel Johnson," p. 227.

CHAPTER III

1910-1940: THE LEANEST YEARS

At the outset of our discussion of Johnson's apparent decline after 1910, and with an eye toward his resurgence after 1940, it may be helpful to comment again on the obvious relationship over the years between the reputation of his criticism and that of the poetry he loved best. In this connection, while we obviously cannot speculate in detail on the fortunes of Neoclassical poetry over the past century and a half, we can say that the references to Johnson's criticism cited thus far do not foster the impression that the school was in ascendance at any time during the nineteenth century. For the most part, the Victorians seem to have looked on the great Neoclassical poets as prominent residents of the arid boneyard lying on the far side of the luxurious garden cultivated by the Romantics. In some respects, however, their attitude appears to have been more flexible than that of the writers whom we encounter in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. For instance, virtually everyone from Macaulay onward had been willing to acknowledge Johnson's preeminence as a critic of Pope and Dryden, and it will be recalled that his expertise on these poets was not universally regarded by nineteenth century commentators as proof of his hopeless incompetence as a critic of poetry. Indeed, in the preceding chapter we touched on several writers who considered Johnson nothing less than a menace on Milton and Gray but who were

willing to concede at the same time that the Lives of Dryden and Pope were masterpieces of English critical literature. The redemptive value of Johnson's astuteness on Dryden and Pope does not appear to have had comparable weight in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, however. The writers of these years are willing to go along with the traditional view that Johnson the critic is seen at his best on Dryden and Pope and even to praise the good sense and independence of his observations on them. But because they were so sure Dryden and Pope were not true poets, their recognition of Johnson's affinity with the great Neoclassicists sometimes reads like a subpoena. Amy Cruse provides us with a comment that can be called typical:

> [Johnson had] little appreciation of the imaginative element in poetry and no ear for the subtler harmonies of verse. . . . He saw little difference between poetry and prose except with regard to metre and rhyme. He belonged to the school of Dryden and Pope.[1]

It goes without saying, of course, that it is no longer fashionable to be scornful of Dryden and Pope and that the change is clearly relevant to the revival of Johnson's criticism in the years following World War II. Although we still find in literary histories and anthologies of the late nineteen-thirties the complaint that Johnson overestimates the value of such "artificial" Neoclassical poets as Dryden and Pope while unfairly censuring such "loftier" poets as Milton and Gray,[2] we can say with some assurance that the notion that Dryden and Pope are artificial poets, or less lofty in any sense than Gray

(presumably Milton still enjoys a certain advantage of altitude), is no longer widely held.[3] As every reader will be aware, this change in attitude has come about as a result of one of the major developments in the scholarship of the past thirty years -- a growing inclination within the literary Establishment to cast aside the Romantic blinkers and to attempt a more objective and sympathetic appraisal of Neoclassical poetry in terms of its own aims and values rather than those of the age which followed.[4]

This effort has naturally led to a more appreciative study of eighteenth century criticism, and the entire process has redounded to Johnson's credit in a general way that is perhaps best reflected in the literary histories written since 1940. Although it would be misleading to suggest that such prominent literary historians as George Sherburn, Louis I. Bredvold, A. D. McKillop, and John Butt beatify Johnson the critic, they do deal with him as a man whose observations on literature are not merely acute within the limitations of his age but universally meaningful. More to the point, they do not repeat the threadbare complaints of the nineteenth century majority concerning his inability to soar with the poetic imagination or to respond with the proper degree of tremulous enthusiasm to the subtler nuances of nature or prosody. Finally, they do not chide him -- as commentators in the early years of the twentieth century seemed increasingly to do -- for failing to recognize that he was the champion of artificial poets and therefore an enemy of progress.[5]

Implicit in the charge, of course, is the final collapse -- a gradual

and complicated process, to be sure -- of Romantic assumptions about poetry and criticism which had beclouded Johnson's reputation for over a century, and the consequent emergence of a variegated climate after World War II in which it became far more likely that some of the finest scholars of our day would undertake the appreciative analyses of Johnson's criticism which we will consider toward the end of the next chapter. Accordingly, it is perhaps helpful to remind ourselves that Johnson's reputation as a critic has always been inextricably involved in a much larger phenomenon and that in the thirty year period preceding the onset of World War II his status seems to have been pegged more inflexibly than ever to the notion that the eighteenth century had little to do with genuine poetry.

In addition to a possibly more rigid attitude toward the Neoclassical poets, references to Johnson's criticism between the World Wars also reflect a no doubt closely related shift of emphasis which is perhaps even more suggestive of an explanation for the falling away of the limited support which Johnson the critic had enjoyed in the late Victorian and Edwardian years. Generally speaking, writers around the middle of the nineteenth century, while clearly aware that there had been Romantic tendencies in Johnson's day and that he had opposed them, did not devote a great deal of thought to the concept of Johnson either as a reactionary or a rebellious force in an age of flux. Instead, most of them simply assumed that Johnson's criticism had been an integral part of a solid if inferior literary culture which had been

plowed under rather abruptly by the triumphant entry of Romanticism, although, as we have seen, there were a few writers on Johnson who continued to be relatively free of the idea that the Romantics had secured an exclusive franchise on the world of letters. No doubt owing to the lengthening historical perspective, however, and an increased awareness that the coming of Romanticism had been a more gradual process than earlier commentators had recognized, almost all scholarly comment on Johnson begins to reflect around the turn of the century a more pointed interest in the question of his precise role in the transition,[6] and by the nineteen-twenties and thirties this concern apparently comes to have a dominant importance in the minds of such writers as Oliver Elton, Louis Cazamian, Percy Hazen Houston, Joseph Epes Brown, Assiso Bosker, and J. W. H. Atkins.

The point to be made here is that, granted the assumptions underlying most of the inquiries, this tendency to concentrate on Johnson's role as a transitional figure was bound to have unfortunate results insofar as his reputation as a critic was concerned, for it handcuffed his few would-be supporters while at the same time stiffening the opposition of his more numerous detractors. Apparently even more uniformly inclined than their nineteenth century predecessors to the view that poetry had attained its apotheosis in the work of the English Romantics, and obviously more aware than their predecessors had been that Johnson had stood somewhere between the Neoclassical criticism of the early eighteenth century and the

Romantic criticism of the early nineteenth, the writers of the twenties and thirties tended to base their estimate of his importance as a critic primarily on their decision as to whether he had resisted Romanticism or helped to bring it about. It is surely one of the more glaring ironies of Johnson's predicament during these years that his claim to be a critic of the first importance was weakened regardless of the role assigned to him, even when the writer making the judgment was favorably disposed toward his subject. For example, to the extent that writers like Elton, Cazamian, and Bosker accepted the more traditional view that Johnson had been an ultraconservative defender of Neoclassicism, they were compelled to deal with him not merely as a critic whose principles were obsolete but as one who had been a vigorous and intractable enemy of progress. On the other hand, to the extent that writers like Houston, Brown, and Atkins leaned toward the increasingly widespread view that Johnson had been in rebellion against some of the more rigid aspects of Neoclassical criticism, they were hard-pressed to expand his importance beyond the relatively humble service of undermining his own tradition and thus hastening the advent of a criticism which was not only far more valid than his own but beyond his sympathy and understanding as well. Thus, in a period when these limitations were almost universally held to be fatal to the criticism of poetry, the obvious drift of either approach was to confine Johnson more securely than ever within what were thought to be the limitations of his age.

In any event, and for whatever reason, it is clear that Johnson the critic did lose ground after 1910. If our examination of nineteenth and early twentieth century references to Johnson's criticism leads us to believe that Sir Walter Raleigh did not rescue Johnson from limbo, a perusal of similar references after 1910 leads even more emphatically to the conclusion that the Six Essays on Johnson did not trigger a great leap forward for Johnson's reputation in the years immediately following its publication. On the contrary, all the evidence points toward a growing rigidity among those who attempted to measure Johnson's achievement with a Romantic yardstick as well as a falling away of the relatively independent minority support which had built up for him in the last decades of the nineteenth century. To be sure, we do find the following statement in a 1926 issue of the Times Literary Supplement:

> Raleigh lifted Johnson's criticism up again from the contempt into which it had been allowed to fall. . . . the six Johnson lectures were as sane and convincing as they were brilliant; and they restored Johnson's position as one of the greatest of the critics of literature. That work of restoration is not likely ever to be undone.[7]

This glowing assertion might lead us to infer that a Johnson revival was well underway at the time, but in the very next paragraph the reviewer reveals his suspicion that Johnson's reputation had perhaps been raised higher than it could stand "when the supporting arms of [Raleigh's] eloquence are removed." He then reverses his field entirely and expresses

reservations about Johnson's critical acumen which might have satisfied that critic's severest nineteenth century detractor:

> We shall have no hesitation in saying that [Johnson] was almost entirely without some of the qualities most indispensable to a critic of poetry. Of the incomparable music of Milton his ear does not seem to have caught a note. Of the beauties of Nature, as something more than things pleasant and pretty to look at, he had no perception. What Nature meant to Wordsworth, and in a different way to Blake, he would have been one of the last men in the world to understand. To mysticism, which in one kind or another has constantly been an element of the very greatest poetry, he was a complete stranger.[8]

The not unfamiliar juxtaposition of these two conflicting points of view suggests that, if the review proves anything, it is not only that Raleigh and Teggart had been somewhat premature in their conclusions about the imminent demise of Romantic criticism but that no significant revival of Johnson's criticism was to be looked for in the late nineteen-twenties.

Unlike the anonymous reviewer[9] and several of the writers named above, most commentators on Johnson's criticism in these years were not of two minds about their subject. Without attempting to argue -- as at least a few of their predecessors had argued -- the clearly contradictory notion that Johnson ranked with the greatest critics, they simply endorsed the nineteenth century consensus that Johnson lacked the imagination and the delicate sensibilities requisite for an understanding of the finest poetry. For example, to the extent that they were at all concerned with his criti-

cism, popular biographers of the period were content to espouse the idea that their subject had been out of touch with the essence of poetry, and their easy confidence underscores the fact that the position cannot have been a very controversial one at the time. As Christopher Hollis remarks in his 1928 biography, the Lives of the Poets "are not much read now," partially owing to the fact that most of Johnson's poets have been forgotten, but more importantly to the fact that "when Johnson has a real poet to write about he is handicapped in his task by the disadvantage that he only very imperfectly knew what poetry was."[10] One year later, Harry Salpeter notes that "without Boswell, we should be wondering by what accident, what freak of chance a man by the name of Samuel Johnson happens to be lying in Westminster Abbey."[11] Acknowledging that Johnson had been wrong on almost every important literary question that he had considered, Salpeter attempts to lessen the offense by arguing that Johnson had been no more insensitive to literature than he had been to music and painting.[12] Hugh Kingsmill deals with Johnson's criticism somewhat more kindly a few years later, but clearly agrees with the prevailing opinion that Johnson had been unable to cope with the most sublime moments of the greatest poets. His comments differ from those of the nineteenth century majority primarily because he includes Donne among the great poets who were beyond Johnson's grasp:

> The aesthetic criticism in the Lives shows Johnson's usual limitations. Though he could feel, he could not interpret the greatness of Shakespeare and Milton, and he could not even feel the recondite beauty of Donne. Yet though he has little of value to say about the highest forms of poetry, he clears away all imitations of sublimity with a vigorous hand.[13]

Pursuant to the attitude of popular biographers toward Johnson's criticism, it may be pertinent to note that the traditional Romantic estimate of Johnson's shortcomings finds expression as late as 1955 in Michael Joyce's Samuel Johnson. Although he starts from the unpromising premise that "no man has reached such high eminence in the world of English letters with so little specific talent for literature as Johnson,"[14] Joyce's discussion of Johnson's criticism is at once more extensive and less negative than the discussions of the men noted above. Specifically, he is willing to concede not only that the Preface to Shakespeare is "an inspiring piece of work [which] contains some of the finest and soundest things that have ever been said on Shakespeare"[15] but that the Lives of the Poets embodies as much wisdom as one might reasonably hope to find in any criticism prior to Coleridge.[16] Nevertheless, his final estimate of Johnson the critic gives us good reason to believe that the conventional nineteenth century view has not disappeared altogether:

> It is not easy to picture [Johnson] gazing through magic casements, or rejoicing in the light that never was, on sea or land. He prefers the heroic and the didactic to the lyric strain; he is deaf to

> the poetry of Lycidas . . . in short, he seems alive to almost every aspect of poetry except the poetic element itself.[17]

Clearly Joyce's concern over Johnson's indifferent contempt for magic casements and other-worldly glimmers is an increasing rarity in the post World War II literary world. As we shall see in the next chapter, Johnson's most formidable detractors in this new age deplore his lack of metaphysics rather than his lack of mysticism. In the twenties and thirties, however, the controlling objection to Johnson's criticism continued to be that of the Romantics, and it often found expression in language which -- indeed, like that of Joyce -- would not have seemed out of place in a literary journal of the early nineteenth century. For example, in support of his argument that Boswell was in most respects a sounder critic than Johnson, James E. Cox has this to say in 1931:

> Johnson's criticism is that of common sense. He was earth-bound. He had no wings for flight. He respected a man whose work recommended itself to his sound analytical judgment, but he was unable to follow a poet into the realms of fancy. He could not see angels, or nymphs, or genii. He could not hear voices in the air. Consequently, he had little use for Milton or Gray.[18]

Similar observations on the inability of Johnson's analytical approach to get at the poetic element in poetry are made in these same years by two somewhat better-known figures, Robert Bridges and A. E. Housman. Like so many others before him, Bridges was indignant over Johnson's

treatment of Lycidas, and he cites this famous critique as conclusive proof that there could be no important relationship between Johnson and poetry:

> It was not Dr. Johnson's ignorance or deficient education that made him dislike Lycidas. It was his unpoetic mind that was at fault, and his taste in Music or Painting would probably hav [sic] been at the same level. Moreover children do not resent what they cannot understand in Poetry, and they generally hav [sic] a keener sense for beauty than Dr. Johnson had -- indeed, if he would hav [sic] become agein [sic] as a little child, he might hav [sic] lik'd Lycidas very well.[19]

We should note in passing, perhaps, that this attack on Johnson's criticism placed R. W. Chapman in something of a quandary. He wished to refute Bridges, but he was unable to follow Sir Walter Raleigh, who had, it will be remembered, rather timidly endorsed Johnson's estimate of Lycidas:[20]

> Between two great critics, I do not presume to decide. Perhaps Dr. Bridges is right and Johnson is here guilty of unpardonable error. But I suggest again that Dr. Bridges proves too much. If Johnson's condemnation of "Lycidas" is indefensible, let it not be defended. But it is surely more reasonable to suppose that he erred by some intelligible delusion -- or even, if you like, wilfully, by wanton petulance -- than to adopt an explanation which, once we accept it, makes shipwreck of his life, of his works, and of his reputation.[21]

The point to be stressed is that Chapman is simply unable to believe that a critic might reject Lycidas on principle and yet remain within the pale.

He makes his position clear as he explains why it is necessary to defend Johnson the critic against charges of the sort advanced by Bridges:

> Why are we not content to admire and revere him as a great moralist, a great prose writer, an unchallenged master of practical wisdom? The answer is, I think, that on those terms we might admire Johnson, but could not love him. It is not possible -- at this distance of time -- to love a man, however great and good, who thinks "Lycidas" a bad poem, unless we satisfy ourselves with some explanation of that strange opinion, short of stark insensibility.[22]

It is worth pointing out that Chapman is far more rigid on this score than John Hepburn Millar, for example, had been a quarter of a century earlier.[23]

A. E. Housman is no less convinced than Bridges that Johnson had been cursed with an unpoetic mind. In Housman's view, Johnson's fondness for Neoclassical poetry provides all the evidence necessary to convict:

> It is impossible to admire such poetry as Pope's so whole-heartedly as Johnson did, and to rest in it with such perfect contentment, without losing the power to appreciate finer poetry or even to recognize it when met. Johnson's unlucky frankness in letting the world know how he was affected by Lycidas has earned his critical judgment discredit enough; but consider also his response to poetry which, though somehow written in the eighteenth century, is of an alien strain and worthy of other ages; consider his attitude to Collins.[24]

There is, of course, no lack of additional evidence to sustain the view that the attitude of Bridges and Housman toward Johnson is the dominant one between 1910 and 1940. In addition to the writers we have con-

sidered thus far we might cite for emphasis others during the period who, obviously without fear of contradiction, advanced the opinion that Johnson's criticism was a defunct commodity. In 1928, for example, Gerald Gould, speculating as to which of Johnson's works might be considered great, doubts that even the most ardent Johnsonian would dare to recommend the Lives of the Poets, "marred [as they are] by judgments so silly and ill-tempered that one has to avert one's face from them in shame."[25] In a somewhat more jovial but no less condescending vein, William H. Coleman writes a few years later that "although few read Johnson these days, I like to turn over the pages of the doughty old moralist, who so often smothers his ideas in Latin polysyllables, just to get the effect of the resounding march of his language."[26] Coleman seems utterly confident that, as of 1935, Johnson's Shakespeare criticism "has long since ceased to exert any influence [and that the Lives of the Poets are] scarcely a dependable source to which to go for a knowledge of the poets Johnson discusses."[27] The attitude toward Johnson reflected in these comments is, of course, one which had great currency throughout the nineteenth century, and it is one which does not fade out entirely until the nineteen-forties. As late as 1946, for example, C. E. Vulliamy writes about Johnson the critic as though he were still securely confined in History's dust bin: "We may regard [his criticism] as a position so frequently carried by assault that little remains of it."[28] Indeed, even one year later, Vincent Starrett endorses the venerable notion

that Johnson "was not a great writer or a great thinker, and he has left nothing behind him to explain his unparalleled renown as a dictator of letters."[29]

As we are now in a position to recognize, however, Vulliamy and Starrett represent the terminus of an attitude, for, as we shall see, Johnson's star was clearly in the ascendant even as their observations were being published. It scarcely needs mention in this connection that, although Johnson's ideas are not universally admired in our day, one looks almost in vain for any recent scholarly reference to his criticism which is marked by the condescension (if not contempt) so characteristic of most similar references between 1910 and 1940. At the same time it should be made absolutely clear that no attempt is being made here to argue that the prevailing attitude toward Johnson necessarily becomes more severe after 1910. On the contrary, the thesis of a Johnsonian decline after that year, and particularly between the World Wars, rests almost entirely on the absence during this period of a counterpoint to the majority view, a voice comparable to that of the tenacious and growing minority which, between 1850 and 1910, insisted that room must somehow be retained at the top for Samuel Johnson.

But if we cannot locate a minority voice of comparable strength after 1910, we nevertheless do perceive at least a few lingering signs of life. Several writers can be found who praised Johnson's criticism with a

relative lack of apology. In 1914, for example, G. A. Mair endorses a point of view which was frequently encountered in the preceding chapter: he maintains that the clarity of Johnson's intellectual vision earns him a high place as a critic regardless of all other considerations:

> [H]e had the power in a wonderfully short time of extracting the kernel and leaving the husk . . . His power of concentration, of seizing on essentials, has given us his best critical work -- nothing could be better, for instance, than his characterization of the poets whom he calls the metaphysical school . . . which is the most valuable part of his life of Cowley. Even where he is most prejudiced -- for instance in his attack on Milton's Lycidas -- there is usually something to be said for his point of view.[30]

In addition, the early nineteen-thirties yield at least two tentative efforts to relate Johnson's criticism in a useful way to developing trends in twentieth century literature. In 1932, A. M. Stephen suggests that Johnson's moral conservatism is more attractive than ever in the increasingly amoral modern age, and contends that, despite the limitations of eighteenth century critical theory, "Johnson's genius had discovered many of the fundamental truths underlying all great art."[31] Specifically, he points to Johnson's insistence on purity of spirit and decorum of diction as a healthy corrective to the practice of modern poets, who he thought were growing more cynical in outlook and irregular in diction every day, and who, above all, seemed to him to be motivated primarily by a desire to "debunk poetry in a vain attempt to make it the servant of the animal

brain which perishes with the physical body."[32] Writing in the same year, Howe Martyn advances a somewhat more detached and impressive estimate:

> It may be concluded that Johnson marked out the place of the critic and the purpose and method of criticism so justly that modern aesthetic theory, aided as it is by the rapid development of psychology, has been able to surpass his work not by fundamental change but only by addition and expansion.[33]

If we are better critics than Johnson, it is only because the science of psychology has taught us more about general human nature -- which is, Martyn assures us, the datum of poetry -- than Johnson could know, and Martyn is at one with Joseph Epes Brown and Joseph Wood Krutch in observing that one of Johnson's chief drawbacks as a critic stems from the fact that "the data on which was built his theory of poetry was largely his own mind and experience."[34]

As might be inferred from the discussion at the outset of this chapter, however, the most interesting references to Johnson's criticism in the nineteen-twenties and thirties are those which are heavily colored by a concern for Johnson's position in reference to the coming of Romanticism, for these studies give us an understanding of how difficult it apparently had become for even sympathetic scholars of that day to believe that there could be anything of universal importance in the critical tradition which the Romantics had supplanted. Surely no more meaningful point of reference could be introduced at this juncture than D. Nichol

Smith's discussion of Johnson's criticism which appeared in 1913 in the Cambridge History of English Literature. It is a discussion which is notably indifferent toward problems which, as we shall see, clearly dominated the approach of many later writers. It will be recalled in this connection that Smith had asserted a decade earlier that Johnson's was one of the few indispensable editions of Shakespeare. "No edition, within its limits," he insists again in this later essay,

> is a safer guide to Shakespeare's meaning. The student who searches the commentators for help in difficulties, soon learns to go straight to Johnson's note as the firm land of common sense in a sea of ingenious fancies. The same robust honesty gives the preface a place by itself among critical pronouncements on Shakespeare.[35]

Smith is no less emphatic in his designation of the Lives of the Poets as "perhaps [the greatest body of critical opinion] in the English language."[36] Although he is willing to concede that Johnson's personal feelings had affected some of his critical judgments, Smith clearly does not subscribe to the current view which held Dryden and Pope to be artificial poets:

> Johnson meant to be scrupulously judicial; but he showed personal feelings. He disliked the acrimonious politics of Milton, the querulous sensitiveness of Swift and the timid foppery of Gray. This personal antipathy underlies his criticisms, though it is qualified, at times, even generously. . . . Of Dryden and Pope he wrote in friendship, and there exists no finer criticism of them. But no critic has been severer on Dryden's negligences, or spoken more ruthlessly of the Essay on Man.[37]

The most remarkable aspect of Smith's essay, however, is its lack of apprehension about Johnson's merits vis à vis those of the poets and critics of the following age. In this respect, if Raleigh's defense of Johnson is notable for its attack on Romantic criticism, Smith's seems even more impressive for its failure to recognize Romantic criticism as a force capable of jeopardizing Johnson's place in criticism's hall of fame. At first glance, of course, Smith seems to join hands with those writers referred to earlier who were beginning to depict Johnson as a rebellious precursor of Romanticism; he notes that when the French Romantics of the next generation set out to justify an appeal from criticism to nature they "found their case stated in [Johnson's] preface, and they did not better what they borrowed."[38] More suggestively, he challenges the hoary nineteenth century complaint that Johnson had "judged by a rigorous code of criticism."[39] But it is precisely because of the careful distinction he makes between Johnson's flexibility and the advancing tide of Romanticism that Smith transcends the prevailing assumptions of the early twentieth century and earns himself a place alongside T. S. Eliot as one of the two really effective defenders of Johnson's criticism to be found in the period under consideration. With formidable independence of mind, Smith makes his position clear in his remarks on Johnson's treatment of Lycidas:

> [Johnson] gave his reasons -- the artificiality of the pastoral convention, the confusion of the allegory with actual fact and sacred truth, and the

> absence of the feeling of real sorrow. But there is the further explanation that he was opposed to some recent tendencies in English poetry. That he had more than Lycidas in his mind is shown by the emphasis of his statement. The same ideas reappear in his criticism of Collins and Gray. . . . In criticizing Lycidas, he had in mind his own contemporaries. When the new tendencies had prevailed, he was said to have judged by a rigorous code of criticism. This code would have been difficult to reconcile with the preface to his edition of Shakespeare; with the praise given by him to Homer's heroes, that they are not described but develop themselves; with his statement that "real criticism" shows "the beauty of thought as formed on the workings of the human heart"; and with his condemnation of "the cant of those who judge by principles rather than perception."[40]

Oliver Elton's approach to Johnson some fifteen years later offers an interesting contrast, to say the least. Motivated by a desire to illustrate the "wealth and variety" of English literature in the middle eighteenth century and clearly determined to do Johnson justice, Elton is nevertheless handicapped in his task by the fact that he sees a better age coming and recognizes one of its signs to be "the undermining of Johnson's critical authority."[41] He is specifically troubled by Johnson's harshness to such Romantic harbingers as Collins and Gray:

> [Johnson] disliked this and that; he disliked piecemeal; but he was only half aware that he was opposing a movement, "through creeks and inlets making." His tendency was to regard "ode, and elegy, and sonnet" as in the nature of freaks and aberrations -- perhaps degenerations. We may, indeed, ask ourselves whether it is possible for a critic to go further wrong than to confound birth with decay.[42]

Despite his reservations, Elton is no less convinced than D. Nichol Smith of the fact that, of the three critics most frequently cited in variorum editions of Shakespeare -- Johnson, Coleridge, and Goethe -- "it is Johnson who often pierces to the sense of a passage."[43] In addition, he is willing to designate the Lives of the Poets as "an ample record" of a "great school, or tradition -- made by one of its masters," and he cites Johnson's discussion of Dryden and Pope, whom he likewise does not take to be prose writers only, as the definitive estimate of their achievement.[44] Yet it is clear that there are greater schools and greater poets in Elton's mind, for in the final analysis his defense of Johnson's criticism rests on the proposition that "we are always coming in Johnson upon something deeper than his ordinary code."[45] Unlike Smith, therefore, Elton does not deal with Johnson as a great critic but as "a truly great critic in his own line,"[46] and the significant qualification obviously stems from his suspicion that, however admirable he had been in most respects, Johnson must be dealt with as an enemy of progress. As a result, Elton's discussion, despite his protests to the contrary, tends to confine Johnson to his age rather than lift him out of it:

> [W]e must reckon with the general fact that Johnson . . . as a critic looked backwards rather than forwards. He had against him not only the poetry of the future but some of the best of his own day. . . . But very few critics, however excellent, have also been prophets. And Johnson, once more, claims deep regard, not only

> on the historic estimate, but in his own right. Gray, with his nicer and rarer judgment, and his true feeling for the Greek spirit, yet left only notes and remarks, no solid critical edifice like the Lives of the Poets; and as we look back past Coleridge towards Dryden, it is Johnson who stands between. We are now, presumably, immune from his errors, and possibly also from his good sense.[47]

Louis Cazamian is another distinguished literary historian of the same era who clearly assumes that it is necessary to probe beneath the surface of Johnson's ordinary code if one is to find any justification for calling him a great critic. No less conscious than Elton of the fact that "[Johnson's] judgment of Gray and Collins is lacking in kindliness [and that] A thick veil hides the future from his gaze, conceals the coming of Romanticism,"[48] Cazamian is perhaps less inclined than Elton to hold Johnson personally culpable. But there is obviously no doubt in his mind that the transition from Neoclassicism to Romanticism represents progress, and that any rearguard figure must be viewed with suspicion:

> A personal authority on literature and manners, a critic of standing, he contributes in maintaining order and stability through a period that is secretly in the throes of a vast transition already begun. His decrees maintain and justify the valuations of the past . . . he is therefore a reformer in nothing. Did he retard the evolution of literature? One cannot positively say so. The forces which are holding it back at this time are greater than the individuals themselves; in the conservative quality of his moral and middle-class instinct, Johnson is a product just as much as he is a cause.[49]

In order to justify calling Johnson a great critic, Cazamian employs a stratagem which is characteristic of the twentieth century; he simply argues that the conscious judgments of Johnson the Neoclassical critic of Shakespeare are at least partially redeemed by the unconscious intuitions of Johnson the Romantic critic:

> In the background of his ideas, one perceives a secret lassitude of artistic sensibility, the need for a vast and universal renovation. . . . It is in rather an envious tone that he speaks of the ages of youthfulness and freshness, when the substance of literature is new, when it lives upon pure observation, and owes nothing yet to books; when further the laborious dissection of the human heart has not destroyed the first bloom of emotions. In this High Priest of the classical faith and of a rational art, sure signs evidence a yearning for another art, for another psychological tone; in his subconscious mind, he shares in the mental change taking place among his contemporaries.[50]

Since the Lives of the Poets for the most part deal with less promising material than the edition of Shakespeare, Cazamian acknowledges that Johnson's "secret movement . . . toward the future" is less obvious in this work; even here, however, it is the unconscious Romantic rather than the conscious Classicist who is seen to triumph. Indeed, Cazamian can account for the effectiveness of Johnson's criticism of Neoclassical poetry in no other way:

> No doubt, he attaches essential importance to construction, to harmony of tone, to transitions, to all the technique of classicism; but the sureness of his taste is made up of an accurate sense of other and

> more subtle elements; beside the fixed and certain qualities, which answer to his primary exigencies, he leaves a place to the charm, the evocative power, the music, the pure beauty of the verse or of the image. We find here instances of characterization too exact, too delicately shaded, not to have been suggested by a creative intuition. This faculty, which makes Johnson a great critic, has its limits; his tolerance stops at certain audacities that are too new for him, while his taste is offended by certain innovations that are too personal. . . . But he has given more solid reality to the classical scale of merits, because he has founded it in the full perception of spiritual energies.[51]

Of an interest equal to the efforts of Elton and Cazamian to get around the idea that Johnson had been an enemy of progress are those of Percy Hazen Houston and Joseph Epes Brown to present Johnson to the twentieth century as an exemplar of enlightened conservatism. Both writers are handicapped by their inability to believe that there had been anything worthy of conservation in Johnson's critical tradition, and as a result each writer tends to undermine his thesis with every point he scores in his discussion. The first of these studies, Houston's Dr. Johnson, a Study in Eighteenth Century Humanism, has been aptly designated by James L. Clifford as "a transitional work . . . [which is] not wholly satisfactory as an analysis of Johnson's thought."[52] It is also a fascinating book, however, owing to the example it provides of the rather spectacular results which can ensue when a scholar attempts to catch a new trapeze without relinquishing his grasp on the old. Obviously in the sway of the Neo-Humanism of

Irving Babbitt, to whom the book is dedicated, Houston observes that Johnson the humanist is not so widely recognized as Burke and states that his intention is to elevate Johnson to Burke's level, to depict him as "the last in the succession of great humanists before the Romantic upheaval, which he foreshadowed and strove to meet."[53] The value of his study, he suggests in his conclusion, lies in the fact that our age, like that of Johnson and Burke, is beset by radical innovation:

> We are living in a time curiously parallel in many of its aspects to the latter years of the eighteenth century, and we can learn much from a study of a great personality in its reaction from the current philosophy of the day. The various forms of naturalistic revolt -- literary, educational, and social -- are now, as then, uppermost in our consciousness, and whatever wisdom the older humanists may offer us out of their experience should be welcome. To show that Dr. Johnson is not the least of these has been the purpose of this study.[54]

Unfortunately, however, Houston's book is devoted almost exclusively to Johnson's criticism, and in this area of his activities Johnson the exemplary defender of inherited traditional values is seen to display wisdom only on those occasions when he rebels against his critical tradition. Specifically, Houston lauds him for rejecting the concept of imitating the classics: "Johnson, in the name of truth and nature, broke with neo-classical imitation, making in this direction, I think, his most important contribution to the progress of criticism." Accordingly, Johnson is re-

ferred to throughout as a "curiously transitional figure," or one who "was constantly rising above the limitations of a vicious school of literature."[55]

Houston attempts to paper over the glaring conflict in his discussion by conceding that Johnson does not qualify as a true humanist, one whom Houston describes as "the critical inquirer into the total experience of mankind as a sane and reasonable guide to the present."[56] Neither Burke nor Johnson quite fits into this definition in Houston's view owing to what he calls their "toryism" -- their inclination to accept tradition uncritically simply because it is tradition. More specifically, Johnson fails to qualify because of his largely unquestioning acceptance of the vicious doctrine of Neoclassicism, which Houston -- employing a Carlylean distinction between the institution and its spiritual essence -- describes as "the ancient humanism codified and conventionalized and made formal within the narrow bounds of art."[57] Houston warns that such formalization must always have disastrous consequences for poetry and criticism:

> [A] certain dry rationalism is almost sure to take the place of a truly imaginative approach just as soon as the underlying principles for which the humanist is searching become a set of external rules. And Johnson, child of his age, and endowed with none too poetical a mind, was never wholly free from this neo-classical taint.[58]

The root of Houston's difficulties is, of course, his unshakable conviction that the eighteenth century is an age without poetry. Like Elton and Cazamian, Houston makes it painfully clear that he believes a better age to be

coming, an age that will provide criticism far superior to anything to be found in Johnson:

> It hardly needs remark . . . that a man living in an age before the revival of the romantic interest in the subjective side of criticism could scarcely attain any of that intimacy and delicacy and fine shading characteristic of many nineteenth-century critics.[59]

Nevertheless, Houston clings tenaciously to his thesis that Johnson, the critic who was constantly rising above a vicious school of literature, provides a salubrious example to the twentieth century owing to his resistance to many of the tendencies which were clearly leading toward the Romanticism which Houston so evidently admires and compared to which he finds Johnson's own critical tradition to be so barren:

> [E]verywhere he found a loosening of the bonds of the ancient discipline which had kept men within the limits of order and decency. The new absorption in individual sensibilities found therefore an arch enemy in Johnson's oft-repeated emphasis upon general human nature as the only proper study of man. These phases of thought, so foreign to his own thinking, appeared to his robust mind as but examples of the general moral weakening he saw all about him. Ossian, the revival of ballad literature, the odes of Gray, the sentimental philosophy of Shaftesbury and Rousseau, were all in his opinion inspired by the same search for novelty that had broken down the traditional ideals, and seemed now about to set up new and false gods. However single examples of this literature might gain something like praise, as in the case of Richardson, as signs of moral and intellectual decadence they ought, in his opinion, to receive unsparing condemnation from

> all upholders of the traditional faith. This bias away from every phase of the sentimental approach to life finds its roots, it need hardly be said, in his stalwart humanism.[60]

A somewhat less obtrusive but similar conflict is found in the introduction to Joseph Epes Brown's The Critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson, a systematic compilation of Johnson's critical utterances which continues to be useful. Like Houston, Brown approvingly depicts Johnson as a critic in rebellion against certain aspects of his own tradition. Because Johnson rejected what the author assumes to have been the central doctrine of Neoclassicism, blind respect for authority, Brown designates him as "an important motive force behind the tidal wave of revolt which was eventually to engulf this outworn creed."[61] At the same time, however, Brown concedes that much of Johnson's value as a critic stems from his life-long practice of "looking backward to the eternal sanities of true humanism."[62] But Brown manages to give the obvious conflict a wider berth than Houston had been able to do. In the first place, he insists that his study "is emphatically no attempt to make an incipient romanticist out of Johnson except in [the] negative aspect of revolt."[63] In the second place, and more to the point, he does not represent Johnson as a cosmic humanist resisting universal moral decay. Instead, he offers him merely as a helpful foil to the poetic excesses which, in his view, must inevitably accompany great revolutions in taste:

> In many ways the second half of the eighteenth century reminds one of our present age. The reaction from neo-classicism saw excesses of taste and feeling roughly comparable to our present revolt from the repressions of the Victorian age. . . . To those, whether of past or present, who waive aside the rich stores of the ages, and mistake originality and identify success with excess, Johnson has much to say of corrective value.[64]

Unfortunately for Johnson's reputation as a critic, however, Brown makes it amply clear that, in his opinion, it is not only excess of taste which lies outside Johnson's sphere of tolerance, but all that is most meaningful in poetry as well; and the language which he uses to discuss Johnson's alleged limitations, like that of some noted earlier, seems more congenial to the early nineteenth than to the early twentieth century. Although he stresses his conviction that Johnson's insistence on making the "Supreme Court of Literary Judicature . . . life itself or 'nature'" is a vast improvement over the "'blind reverence' for antiquity" which he believed to be the major premise of Neoclassical criticism,[65] Brown nevertheless concludes that Johnson's criticism is still far too narrow owing to the fact that "he tended to identify his own somewhat limited tastes with the one unalterable standard of truth to human nature":[66]

> Johnson's criticism springs out of his own outlook on life. Everywhere we turn, we are met by the great Christian moralist. On the whole this influence was narrowing, pointing away from catholicity of taste and a tolerance embracing the fact that truth (in Lord Morley's words) "dwells in divers mansions and wears vestures of many colours, and speaking strange tongues."[67]

As proof of the Christian moralist's inability to cope with the highest flights of poetry, Brown cites Johnson's critiques on The Bard and Lycidas:

> Obviously poetry's wings are straitly clipped. . . . The fault lies in a too literal interpretation of terms. [Johnson] failed to distinguish between morality and mere didacticism. The world has but too often been loath to accord to beauty and the soarings of the human spirit the odour of sanctity.[68]

The foregoing remarks leave little doubt, of course, that Brown is at one with the majority of nineteenth century critics in placing the ultimate reaches of poetry beyond Johnson's grasp; but he makes this point even more explicitly later on in a statement which seems curiously indebted to both Keats and Aristotle:

> In short, the conception of poetry as a chariot whirling us heavenward in glory above the commonplaces of daily life, was not his. Nor did one emotionally so reticent choose to regard it as a catharsis for the emotional life of the poet and his circle of readers.[69]

Although Brown's prodigious labor in compiling Johnson's critical statements probably constitutes a more eloquent argument in behalf of Johnson's value as a critic than that which is set forth in his book, it must be recognized that, in the introduction, Brown does not really grant Johnson a significantly higher place as a critic than most nineteenth century commentators would have been willing to allow him:

> [Johnson's] method may produce sound criticism when the subject falls within the range of the critic's own appreciation. In the case of Johnson it did produce a

> magnificent body of criticism of permanent value. Such are his lives of Pope and Dryden, his Shakespearean preface (in part), and that splendid piece of pioneer work on the metaphysical poets, the Life of Cowley. Here was material suited to his own particular genius.[70]

Although admittedly the reference to "a magnificent body of criticism of permanent value" does seem to strike a new note, it should be recalled that Macaulay had not hesitated to acknowledge the excellence of Johnson's criticism of Pope,[71] and that even Thomas Sergeant Perry had been willing to concede that (in part) the Preface to Shakespeare had been serviceable to letters.[72] As for the discussion of metaphysical poetry in the Life of Cowley, Hazlitt, as we noted earlier, had remarked that it was a task "for which Dr. Johnson's powers both of thought and expression were better fitted than any other man's."[73] That Brown and these nineteenth century writers agree on the subject of Johnson's strong points is less significant, of course, than the fact that he does not deviate from them noticeably on the score of Johnson's supposed great debilitating weakness as a critic. It seems clear that Brown would be no less willing than Macaulay or Perry to subscribe to the qualification which Hazlitt appended to the statement just quoted:

> If he had had the same capacity of following the flights of a truly poetic imagination, or for feeling the finer touches of nature, that he had felicity and force in detecting and exposing the aberrations from the broad and beaten path of propriety and common sense, [Johnson] would have amply de-

> served the reputation he has acquired as a philosophical critic.[74]

To be sure, Brown does depart from tradition in asserting Johnson's usefulness as a corrective against excesses of poetic taste, but the idea that poetry and criticism had found their highest perfection in the achievement of the English Romantics is apparently so deeply ingrained in his mind that he cannot cling to even this limited thesis throughout. In the end, he explains that the excesses of Johnson's day had, after all, been a part of that age's "general reaction from aridity of soul," and that, in retrospect, Johnson's opposition thus could not be regarded with whole-hearted admiration:

> These early manifestations of the romantic temper, whether in poetry or fiction, inclined toward affectation, obscurity, lawlessness, excess of feeling and enthusiasm. As such they were anathema to Johnson -- often not without good reason, one might add. Their ultimate value as dissolvents of a false classicism and as experiments in new fields, Johnson failed to see.[75]

It should be emphasized at this point that the foregoing discussion has not been motivated by a desire to make mock of the scholars cited but rather by a desire to support the contention made earlier in this chapter that the achievement of the Romantics seems to have constituted a more efficient barrier to writers on Johnson's criticism in the nineteen-twenties and thirties than it had done for their counterparts in the years between 1850 and 1910. Generally speaking, most of the defenders of Johnson's

criticism whom we encountered in the preceding chapter insisted, albeit sometimes with grave reservations, that Johnson merited a place with the greatest critics, and virtually all of them stressed the idea that his criticism had a clear and lively relevance to the modern world of letters. The writers whom we have just considered are obviously willing to settle for a less exalted status for their subject and are more disposed to limit the validity and usefulness of his criticism to its historical context. Above all, they seem far more restricted than their predecessors had been by the notion that Johnson's role in the transition from Classic to Romantic values in literature had to be a primary consideration in any estimate of his importance as a critic.

Clearly, however, there was no widespread agreement at the time -- as indeed there is probably no widespread agreement now[76] -- as to precisely where Johnson did stand in that transition, and most readers will recall that certain of Joseph Epes Brown's most basic assumptions about Johnson's role found challengers. R. S. Crane, for example, observed in a review article that

> the distinguishing feature of neo-classicism as it appears in all its most influential spokesmen from Boileau to Pope was not, as Mr. Brown thinks, "its concept of authority," but precisely that appeal to "Nature" . . . for which Johnson stood. . . . The only difference, in fact, that we can see between Johnson and the critics who are generally recognized as orthodox neo-classicists is that he perhaps went farther than some of them did in

> distinguishing between the genuine "laws of nature" and the "accidental prescriptions of authority." But this, if true, amounts to no more than a difference of degree; that there were rules . . . to which poets must conform, [Johnson] never once questioned. And that, after all, is the essential point.[77]

More to our purpose, perhaps, Irving Babbitt argued that Johnson's negative attitude toward the imagination precluded his being numbered not only among the rebels against Neoclassicism but among the great critics as well. His remarks apparently prompted similar discussions of Johnson and the imagination by Stuart Gerry Brown and R. D. Havens. Prior to turning to these writers, however, we should give some notice to one additional effort of the period to present Johnson to the unsettled masses of the twentieth century as a paradigm of enlightened conservatism. Writing in The Bookman in 1930, Alfred Noyes maintained that "originality is fundamentally incompatible with mere novelty [for] there is no growth without roots, and the roots run back through the ages."[78] Unlike the great majority of men in his age and our own, Johnson had, in Noyes' view, been in touch with those roots. In support of this contention, Noyes pointed to Johnson's discussion of metaphysical poetry in the Life of Cowley. Of Johnson's remark that the thoughts of the metaphysicals "are not obvious, but neither are they just; and the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were found," Noyes has this to say:

> Far from wondering that he missed them! This great man, through all the ponderous trappings of his age, by dint of sheer sincerity, was on the verge of a critical discovery here of the very first importance -- a theory of art that Plato would have understood, before him; and Wordsworth after him; but very few others in the history of literature; a theory that fully accounts for the dilemma in which modern criticism finds itself.[79]

Regrettably, Noyes does not develop this intriguing suggestion, and, unlike the other writers whom we have just looked at, he is not interested in Johnson's role as a transitional critic. But his reference to the "ponderous trappings" of Johnson's age gives us a clue that he shares the prevailing assumptions of the day about the limitations of eighteenth century criticism. He makes it clear a few paragraphs further along that, like Percy Hazen Houston, he admires Johnson the conservative considerably more than he does Johnson the critic:

> When Johnson praised or blamed particular poems in detail the prejudices of his age made him an unreliable judge, especially of the technique of verse. But whenever he wrote of general principles, his own sincerity led him directly to the heart of the matter.[80]

Irving Babbitt examines the prejudices of Johnson's age in somewhat greater detail. He identifies one of the most dominant of those prejudices as a congenital distrust of the concept of the creative imagination and contends that the major impetus of the revolt against Neoclassicism is found in the efforts of some eighteenth century writers to rehabilitate that con-

cept. Since Johnson had been conspicuously absent from that movement, Babbitt takes exception to Joseph Epes Brown's conclusion that Johnson had been an "important motive force" in undermining his own tradition.[81] It should be made clear, perhaps, that Babbitt, who was not a notable admirer of Romanticism in any case, does not argue from the premise that the English Romantics had introduced an ultimate criterion of excellence into the realm of criticism. As a matter of fact, the burden of his argument is that

> [i]f there is to be any genuine advance in criticism at the present time a first step would seem to be to overcome the neo-classic and romantic opposition between reason and imagination and seek to recover the Aristotelian idea of a co-operation between the two.[82]

Nevertheless, Babbitt's major supporting point is that Johnson's inability to understand the imaginative use of fiction had sealed him off from the ultimate reaches of art, and some of the assumptions about poetry and criticism which emerge in the course of his discussion are not noticeably different from those of the majority of Johnson's nineteenth and early twentieth century critics. For instance, Babbitt employs a telling point in his remarks on Johnson's distaste for mythological fiction:

> Granted that classical fiction had become intolerably trite in the hands of minor poets, one is inclined to ask whether Johnson felt sufficiently how profoundly poetical this fiction had once been, nay, how poetical it may still be, if employed imaginatively. We do not think of him as striv-

> ing that he might
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathéd horn.[83]

Babbitt's observations on Johnson's attitude toward the pastoral are equally freighted with conventional Romantic assumptions about poetry. But they are also interesting because of the extra-literary consideration which seems to color Babbitt's judgment. Johnson's critique of Lycidas has, of course, been damned over the years by literally hordes of critics. Babbitt manages to be conspicuous in this multitude, however, owing to the fact that he censures Johnson not only for failing to know that "man is never perhaps more spontaneously imaginative than when ye yields to his Arcadian longings," but also for failing to warn against a dangerous intellectual trend which was in Babbitt's view impinging on the pastoral convention at the time:

> The idyllic imagination was assuming a new importance in the time of Johnson as a result of its association by Rousseau and other primitivists with a state of nature to which men were actually invited to return. More or less innocent illusion was thus being converted into dangerous delusion. Dr. Johnson not only failed, as it seems to me, to do justice to the poetry of pastoral fiction; he also failed -- though, in view of his condemnation of Rousseau, it is not possible to speak so confidently on this point -- to perceive its full peril.[84]

In substance, then, Babbitt's estimate of Johnson the critic does not deviate radically from the nineteenth century consensus; once again, Johnson is depicted as a critic who, because of a deficiency of imagination, is

out of touch with the poetic element in poetry. Writing a decade later, Stuart Gerry Brown finds Babbitt's thesis in the main congenial, although he notes that the very existence of Rasselas tends to invalidate the notion that Johnson placed fiction and truth in absolute opposition.[85] On the other hand, Brown thoroughly approved of Babbitt's opinion that what Johnson had feared under the name of imagination would be more properly called in our day "revery, with its implications of escape from unpleasant realities."[86] In terms of this definition, Brown is even willing to argue that Johnson had been wiser to fear imagination than some of the Romantics had been to abandon themselves to it some years later.[87] Brown distinguishes two additional meanings of the word, however, and makes it clear that, in his opinion, Johnson's inability to comprehend imagination in the more exalted of these two definitions rendered him incapable of dealing with the highest achievements in poetry. In the first of the definitions alluded to, Brown equates imagination with invention, or "the combined faculties of observation and memory," and acknowledges not only that Johnson had respected imagination in this sense, but that he had regarded it as "the most important of a poet's possessions . . . [the one by which] his work will stand or fall."[88] But Brown argues that there is a higher meaning of the word and that the higher meaning represents a step which Johnson could not attain owing to the limitations of his age. What he has in mind seems close to the faculty which the great Romantics had celebrated as the key to transcendental knowledge:

> Johnson overlooked still another type of imagination which is perhaps the highest: the imagination which seizes upon the abstractions of reason and improves upon them, turns ideas of the mind into ideals. It is this high power which enables the greatest poets to present their characters free from the petty hindrances and embarrassments of ordinary life, to give completeness to their humanity, and fullness to their experience. As Aristotle would have said, they are seen not as they are, but as they ought to be.[89]

In 1943, Raymond D. Havens published an essay entitled "Johnson's Distrust of the Imagination" in which he analyzes Johnson's attitude toward the imagination in somewhat greater detail. Although he refers to neither Babbitt nor Brown in his prefatory remarks, he states that his purpose is to demonstrate that "Johnson uses imagination in more senses than is generally realized,"[90] and goes on to distinguish six of these meanings. Moreover, he maintains that, in Johnson's most complex use of the word, imagination was the only faculty which was thought to account for "those capricious graces of literature which defy analysis, which rise up involuntarily in the minds of gifted persons, and which (neither springing from reason nor being addressed to it) are by no means universal in their appeal."[91] But as his title implies, Havens' major concern is the fact that Johnson could not trust imagination on any level. In Havens' opinion, imagination in even its most attractive sense remained for Johnson a lawless faculty akin to day-dreaming -- a faculty which thus could not be trusted to serve conventional morality, and Havens is clearly convinced

that this distrust of the imagination compels us to reject Johnson as a reliable critic:

> Johnson failed to realize that fiction, whether in the form of novels or plays or poems, may, without direct moral teaching, yield catharsis, insight, exaltation, vicarious experience, wider sympathies and better understanding. Viewing the imagination chiefly as "a licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations, and impatient of restraint," as the father of day dreaming, of extravagant conceptions, and impossible adventures, he was unable to realize that it may become, alike in science, in statesmanship, in military strategy, or in art one of the highest faculties of man. Through it, he would have been surprised to learn, we may rise from the particular to the general, from the transient and the trivial to the permanent and the universal, from multiplicity to unity, from fiction to truth.[92]

It can be argued, of course, that Babbitt, Brown, and Havens do not deal with Johnson unsympathetically; indeed, they are willing to concede that his attitude toward the imagination had been more flexible than the great Romantics would have allowed. It is equally clear, however, that they continue to be as convinced as the great Romantics had been that disciplined good sense operating on the experience of this world can neither produce nor evaluate the highest kind of poetry, and that Johnson -- who would scarcely allow that more mysterious influences were involved -- must therefore be excluded from the first ranks of criticism. Implicit in their discussion is the same conviction which had dominated the thoughts of Elton, Cazamian, Houston, and Joseph Epes Brown -- the conviction

that the Romantics, through the efficacy of the imagination, had slipped the bonds of earth and discovered (or in any event rediscovered) a dimension of poetic meaning above and beyond anything dreamed of by Johnson and most of his eighteenth century colleagues. To be sure, the Victorians and Edwardians had shared this conviction; but unlike the writers just named, a surprising number of those who did had managed to remain sufficiently flexible on the subject to argue that, even on his own terms, Johnson somehow belonged among the greatest critics. As we have seen, such flexibility is a rare commodity among writers on Johnson in the nineteen-twenties and thirties.

With all the foregoing considerations in mind, we are perhaps better able to appreciate the significance of Joseph Wood Krutch's Samuel Johnson, which appeared in 1944. Although Krutch modestly identifies himself as a nonspecialist whose intention is to "produce a large inclusive book which will serve to give the general reader a running account of Johnson's life, character, and works as they appear in the light of contemporary knowledge and contemporary judgment," most Johnson scholars today probably would designate Samuel Johnson as one of the two or three most important contributions to modern Johnson scholarship. In essence, Krutch's book is a study of Johnson's mind, and he naturally devotes a great deal of attention to the criticism. In assessing the current low estate of that criticism, Krutch is frankly surprised that the Romantic estimate should

have survived so long in the decidedly un-Romantic intellectual climate of the mid-twentieth century:

> [Johnson's] literary reputation as a whole has found more and stronger champions in the last quarter of a century than at any other time since his own. But there is also no doubt that the most widely current stereotypes, the most usual textbook commonplaces, tend to dismiss his criticism as pedantic and unimaginative. The great romantics of the early nineteenth century had, of course, no use for him. They cultivated mystical insights and rose to rhapsody. The twentieth century has often accepted the romantics' estimate of Johnson, while moving away from the attitude which led them to formulate it. In many respects he is actually closer to us than the romantics are.[93]

Although Krutch does not represent Johnson as a critic who is beyond reproach, he does rather vigorously brush aside basic assumptions about poetry and criticism which, as we have seen, had constituted major stumbling blocks for writers on Johnson in the nineteen twenties and thirties.[94] As might be inferred from the quotation just given, the most striking contrast between the earlier approach and that of Krutch is the latter's dour and unapologetic skepticism about Romantic claims for the imagination as a source of transcendental truth. In regard to the imagination, Krutch acknowledges that Johnson had been a follower of Hobbes -- one who believed that "We do not know anything except what we have learned through experience, through vicarious experience, or through logic,"[95] and proceeds to argue that such a concept, while clearly re-

stricting the subject matter of poetry to the concerns of this rather than of some other world, did not necessarily disqualify Johnson from becoming as great a critic as any. Indeed, Krutch not only maintains that Johnson's this-worldly conception of the imagination is, on the whole, a rather sane one, but even goes so far as to defend Johnson's failure to make a clear-cut distinction between poetry and prose:

> Johnson did not expect to get from the poetry anything ineffable because (aside perhaps from what revealed Christianity provides) he did not suppose man capable of either discovering or communicating anything ineffable. He did not expect to find anywhere, even in poetry, anything which transcends comprehension or even so nearly transcends it as to be beyond the reach of the same rational judgment which is valid in relation to all other products of the human mind. What he did expect was knowledge of and wisdom concerning the characters and manners of men, and intelligible judgments concerning human life. He expected to find this expressed supremely well, but he certainly supposed that poets would use their wits both in discovering and in formulating what they had to say, and it is unlikely that he supposed any sharp line could be drawn between prose and poetry except that line which distinguishes the metrical from the nonmetrical. However little he would have agreed with Matthew Arnold in many of the latter's pronouncements, he would probably have found his definition of prose as good words in good order and his definition of poetry as the best words in the best order as satisfactory as any likely to be formulated, and he would most certainly have agreed with Mr. T. S. Eliot that the minimal virtues of good poetry are those of good prose. He did not, in other words, believe that there was any clearly definable and absolute qualitative difference between the one and the other or that anything which had no prose meaning could possibly become, by any magic, good poetry.[96]

In addition to landing hard on the durable notion that Johnson's indifference toward the imagination as a mysterious source of truth must automatically disqualify him as a critic, Krutch also appears to have resolved -- primarily through the expedient of ignoring it -- the worrisome problem of Johnson's role as a transitional critic. On the score of Johnson's position relative to that of the Neoclassical critics of the early eighteenth century and the Romantic critics of the early nineteenth, Krutch seems to have only one point to make -- that Johnson is one of the few critics of the past who do not have to kowtow in either direction in time: "One of [Johnson's] conscious aims was certainly that of taking literature out of the hands of the pedants. Had he been gifted with the power of foreseeing the future he would undoubtedly have added another: that of keeping it out of the clutches of the romantics and the aesthetes."[97]

It is not suggested, to be sure, that Krutch single-handedly achieved a complete and immediate turnabout in the prevailing estimate of Johnson's criticism. Johnson had had equally prominent defenders in the preceding thirty years and, as Krutch himself suggests, the time simply had become ripe for revaluation. Yet Krutch's Samuel Johnson does provide us with a logical stopping point for the chapter, for, more than any other single work, it seems to constitute a watershed between two distinct phases of Johnson's twentieth century reputation. As we shall see in the following chapters, Johnson does not lack formidable adversaries

in the post-war years; indeed, some of the most prominent of these already had been heard from prior to the publication of Krutch's biography. But these are adversaries of a new breed, and their estimate of Johnson's criticism starts from assumptions about poetry which are radically different from those assailed by Krutch. The older twentieth century view -- the view which tended to pooh-pooh Johnson as an earthbound and obtuse critic who was significant primarily because he either helped or hindered the onrush of Romanticism -- falls away drastically after World War II, and it is not to be doubted that Krutch's book was a major factor in its decline. Moreover, in defending the legitimacy of a criticism which did not recognize a separate realm of the aesthetic -- which assumed, in fact, that "Anyone who has the equipment to judge men and manners and morals has the equipment to judge literature"[98] -- Krutch clearly anticipates the arguments of Johnson's most forceful recent advocates, Jean Hagstrum, W. R. Keast, and Walter Jackson Bate.

But in summing-up our discussion of Johnson's reputation between 1910 and 1940, it should be stressed again that the evidence reviewed thus far seems to do more than merely document and sustain Krutch's opinion that the Romantic estimate of Johnson's criticism continued to hold sway until the early nineteen-forties. Such a judgment scarcely needs support in any event, for no one has ever suggested that Johnson the critic scored significant gains in our time prior to World War II. Nevertheless, as we

noted in Chapter One, virtually every modern writer who has commented on the subject persists in dating Johnson's twentieth century comeback from the appearance in 1910 of Sir Walter Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson. As was acknowledged previously, the Six Essays on Johnson occupies an honored place in modern Johnson scholarship and it is not to be doubted that, over the long haul, Raleigh has been influential. But the line on Johnson's performance chart simply does not turn upward after 1910. On the contrary, the thesis pursued in this and the preceding chapter is that Johnson the critic has enjoyed not one but two revivals in the years since his death. The first is an admittedly faint but unmistakable quickening of interest which builds up in the last decades of the nineteenth century, reaches its peak in the first decade of the twentieth, and then peters out rather suddenly after 1910. The second is the far more pronounced resurgence which begins in the nineteen-forties and continues under a full head of steam to this day. Surely it shows no disrespect to Sir Walter Raleigh to suggest that he seems to relate more clearly to the end of the first revival than to the beginning to the second. If a single work must be designated as the starting point for the most recent revival of Johnson's criticism, Krutch's Samuel Johnson would seem to be, for the reasons given above, a far more logical choice than the Six Essays on Johnson. Although a number of other major writers were involved in an important way in the initial stages of this second revival, Krutch's "large and inclusive book"

nevertheless constitutes the most prominent landmark.

It is not implied, of course, that the foregoing discussion has yielded findings of earth-shaking importance. On the other hand, however, the view of Johnson's nineteenth and early twentieth century reputation which has been presented is one which apparently has not been suggested before. Accordingly, it may be appropriate to conclude this chapter with one final statement of the basic case for revising, in the manner outlined above, some of our basic assumptions on this score. Quite simply, this case rests on the fact that there was a falling away after 1910 of the rather vigorous minority support which appears to have built up for Johnson between 1875 and 1910. Although admittedly Johnson was under heavy fire during the earlier period he nevertheless clearly exerted some influence. In Chapter Two, it will be remembered, we encountered a number of writers who believed, and who apparently had good reason to believe, that Johnson was in their day the most generally recognized and influential critic in English literature. One or two of them went so far as to suggest that Johnson's virtues in the realm of the concrete so far outweighed any deficiencies he might have in the realm of the amorphous that he must remain a permanent model for all future British critics. Even among writers who were plainly convinced that Romantic ideas had taken precedence we found several who apparently could not stop admiring the way Johnson's mind worked. As a result, they were notably reluctant to dis-

pense altogether with his criticism, even when that criticism went most clearly against the Romantic grain. Indeed, a few of them were willing to fight a rather desperate battle of paradoxes to insist that Johnson was a critic who must be studied -- heresies and all -- by anyone aspiring to a critical education. In short, we surveyed an impressive number of Victorian and Edwardian writers who revealed, in one way or another, that Johnson the critic continued to be an active force in their world of letters.

But Johnson was scarcely that for most of the writers we have touched upon in this chapter. Contrary to what we have assumed, writers on Johnson in this later period seem to have been even more uniformly disposed than their predecessors to believe that the English Romantic critics had said everything that needed saying about poetry. Hence, even sympathetic writers tended to see less significance in Johnson's critical judgments than they did in the question of his function in the historical process leading to the criticism of the following age. As a consequence, they were compelled to settle for a far less exalted status for their subject than that insisted upon by most of his Victorian and Edwardian defenders. To be sure, D. Nichol Smith does continue after 1910 to insist on the primacy of Johnson's criticism. In addition, one of the giants of twentieth century letters, T. S. Eliot, takes up Johnson's cause in the early nineteen-thirties. But as we shall see in the chapters which follow,

Smith's influence between the World Wars seems to have been confined largely to Shakespeare scholarship, and Eliot's support does not appear to have borne fruit until after World War II. Therefore, although Smith and Eliot are recognized as piers capable of sustaining most literary reputations over lean decades, we must conclude that the base of Johnson's support, which most likely had never been large in any event, became noticeably smaller after 1910, and that the overall quality of his support deteriorated in a manner which is even more significant.

One final word might be said in this regard. Although it was admitted in Chapter One that there is no necessary relationship between Johnson's following and the number of new editions of his works published in any given period, we nevertheless should not ignore the fact that only one new edition of the Lives of the Poets was published after 1910, the Everyman's edition which came out in 1925. While this fact may point to nothing more sinister than the general excellence of G. Birkbeck Hill's 1905 edition, or to a change in the economics of book publishing, the dearth of new editions after 1910 does stand in rather striking contrast to the avalanche of editions published between 1850 and 1910. At the very least, the decrease would seem to confirm the notion that the years we have surveyed in this chapter represent something of a no man's land between two periods of relatively more intense interest in Johnson the critic.

In any event, when all the foregoing factors are weighed, it seems reasonable to conclude that these are indeed Johnson's leanest years, and that the line on his performance chart should therefore reflect not only a decline after 1910 but probably a decline to an all-time low.

NOTES

CHAPTER III

[1]English Literature Through the Ages (London, 1922), p. 341. Additional evidence can be cited to support the idea that writers after 1910 tended to be increasingly severe toward the great Neoclassical poets. For instance, John Metcalf notes somewhat earlier than Miss Cruse that the Lives show Johnson to his best advantage, "though revealing the limitations of a follower of the 'School of Pope.'" He concludes that Johnson was a "belated classicist" at a time when "the tide of reaction was setting in strong toward Romanticism." English Literature (Richmond, 1912), pp. 268-69. Joseph William Long complains a few years later that Johnson "is often misleading, giving praise to artificial poets, like Cowley and Pope," while doing "scant justice or abundant injustice to nobler poets like Gray and Milton." English Literature: Its History and Significance in the Life of the English Speaking World (Boston, 1919), p. 292. Percy Hazen Houston, a scholar whom we will encounter a few pages further along in our text, also explains that it is because of his devotion to the Neoclassical school of poetry that Johnson shows "a good deal of obtuseness to the finer appeal of poetry," as witnessed by his treatment of Lycidas and Gray's odes. Main Currents in English Literature: a Brief History of the English People (New York, 1926), p. 251. Johnson's reputation also appears to have been depressed by pure ignorance during the period under consideration. Joseph Bunn Heidler and Harry Houston Peckham identify the Lives of the Poets as a work which contains biographies and criticism of "all the English poets that Johnson thought noteworthy," and suggest that it is "really astonishing" how many of Johnson's poets are now unknown. A History of English Literature (New York, 1931), p. 325. The desire to do Johnson justice without relinquishing the notion that the eighteenth century had been an age without poetry leads a number of scholars into interesting logical traps during the nineteen-twenties and thirties. Mildred C. Struble provides an example which is not considered in the text: "Although the [eighteenth century] is an age of prose, nevertheless Johnson is so discerning of the psychology of neoclassicism that his Lives have become the outstanding reliable critique of the movement." A Johnson Handbook (New York, 1933), p. 269.

[2]The Literature of England: an Anthology and a History, eds. George Benjamin Woods, Homer A. Watt, and George K. Anderson (Chicago, 1936), I, 903. See also William Bradley Otis and Morris A. Needle-

man, A Survey History of English Literature (New York, 1938), p. 37.

[3]One never knows, however; in a literary history published two years ago we find the following: "[Johnson's] greatest work is the Lives of the Poets -- fifty-two of them -- ranging from Cowley to his own contemporaries. In this he reveals a truly eighteenth century attitude, giving the highest place to the 'correct' poets, while Milton, Donne, and Gray, among others, fare badly because they appeal to the imagination rather than to reason." The author concludes her discussion of Johnson's criticism by quoting Lytton Strachey's famous epigram. Helen Elizabeth Stowell, An Introduction to English Literature (London, 1966), p. 101.

[4]For an authoritative discussion of this phenomenon, see James L. Clifford's "The Eighteenth Century," MLQ, XXVI (1965), 114-15.

[5]All readers will be aware that the scholars named have played a leading role in the twentieth century revaluation of eighteenth century literature. Although they are generally sympathetic toward Johnson's criticism, they nevertheless espouse more of the old stereotypes than one might expect. George Sherburn, for example, praises the edition of Shakespeare and its Preface and notes the excellence and permanent value of Johnson's work on Dryden and Pope; however, he accuses Johnson of being unfair to Cowley and Milton, among others. Of the latter, he says "[Johnson's] worst case of critical blindness is Milton, for whom he had a dislike grounded on religious and political issues which carried over to the poet's language and versification." A Literary History of England, ed. Albert C. Baugh (New York, 1948), p. 996. Sherburn's final estimate is generous, however, and it is clear that he is not in agreement with some modern critics who, as we shall see in the next chapter, discount Johnson as a critic owing to his alleged inability to distinguish between literature and life: "It would be difficult to determine whether the greatest excellence of the Lives lies in Johnson's fine understanding of human nature manifested as poetic genius or in his vigorous and sensible criticism of individual poems" (pp. 996-97). Louis I. Bredvold, although generally respectful toward Johnson, seems to incline toward the paradox which had served as a refuge for many nineteenth century commentators: "[Johnson's] dicta, however wrong-headed they may appear to us, command our respect because they are honest appeals to the concrete experience of life." The Literature of the Restoration and the Eighteenth Century (New York, 1962), p. 133. Like Sherburn, Bredvold does not seem obsessed with the idea that the work of art is to be judged only according to criteria contained within itself. In addition, he disparages the notion that Johnson had been a rebel against Neoclassicism, a notion which, as we shall see

in the course of this chapter, had enjoyed quite a vogue during the nineteen-twenties and thirties: "This appeal from authority and rules to nature is essentially liberalizing, and Johnson's influence has for this reason been mistakenly described as one of the dissolvents of English classicism. . . . But the nature he appealed to was not the whim or idiosyncrasy of the individual, but the nature by which alone . . . may be formed a judgment of life or art" (p. 133). Bredvold says of the Preface to Shakespeare that Johnson's "robust and independent judgment gives his commentary a permanent interest" (p. 132). Of the Lives, however, he says merely that "Johnson commented in detail on the whole body of significant English poetry from Cowley to his own day . . . [and that] the reader who turns the pages of these volumes has something of the experience of listening to the old man's conversation in Thrale's library" (p. 133). A. D. McKillop endorses what most modern Johnsonians would designate as the number one heresy. He notes that the reader who is under Boswell's spell will no doubt conclude that "Johnson's life and personality" are greater than his writings and adds that "this judgment is correct, yet it should be our purpose to find the true Johnson both in the life and the works." English Literature from Dryden to Burns (New York, 1948), p. 323. McKillop makes no radical claims for Johnson's criticism. The following statement might have been endorsed by many nineteenth century writers, if not by their counterparts of the nineteen-twenties and thirties: "[Johnson's] opinions are at times prejudiced and erroneous, but they are seldom perfunctory or languid. They do not represent mere eighteenth-century convention, but convention as experienced and interpreted anew by Samuel Johnson. His unsympathetic treatment of Milton and Gray is notorious. His estimates of Dryden and Pope and his praise of Addison are from the eighteenth-century point of view definitive. Other lives make famous contributions to criticism, e. g. the description of metaphysical poetry in the life of Cowley, the account of Collins' romanticism, and the argument that the mysteries of the Christian religion are not suitable for poetry. . . . the Lives abound in shrewd comments on the personalities of the poets, and on the actual operations of literary ambitions and rivalries, and the unique quality of the work is due to the combination and fusion of biography and criticism" (p. 331). Writing in collaboration with H. V. D. Dyson in 1940, John Butt cited Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare as his most brilliant achievement, although he admitted that "some of [Johnson's] judgments on Shakespeare are astonishingly unlike our own, some of his prejudices almost perverse . . . but he rises greatly to his great occasion and there is no piece of general criticism on the same scale that approaches it." Augustans and Romantics (London, 1940), p. 68. In addition, Butt accepts the time-honored judgment that Johnson the critic is seen at his best on Dryden and Pope and cites the Lives of these two poets as an achievement which adds "depth and dignity to the English

critical tradition" (p. 69). In his more widely-known The Augustan Age, Butt continues in the same vein. Of the Preface to Shakespeare, he says: "The luminousness of the aphorisms has scarcely been surpassed, and the vigour of the defence of Shakespeare for not observing the unities shows the liberal tradition of English classical criticism at its best." The Augustan Age (London, 1950), p. 123. He also praises what he considers Johnson's laudable desire in the Lives of the Poets, to "form his readers' judgments, to qualify their minds to think justly about poetry . . . his appeal is therefore to the hearts and minds of his readers and not to the authority of books" (pp. 132-33).

[6]See note 7, Chapter Two. Virtually all of the earlier writers cited disparage Johnson as the representative of a benighted age, but they do not stress the idea that he fought a rear guard action against the ostensibly more enlightened age which followed. Matthew Arnold notes that Johnson "was a strong force of conservation and concentration, in an epoch which by its natural tendencies seemed moving towards expansion and freedom." But it is clear that he does not regard Johnson's position as particularly odious. See Chapter Two, pages 60 and 61. Sir Leslie Stephen provides an observation which seems typical of the earlier attitude. He remarks simply that Johnson's "criticism is that of a school which has died out under the great revolution of modern taste." See Chapter Two, page 68. As late as 1896, we find C. E. Vaughan damning Johnson as an out and out villain; he flays Johnson as an enemy of originality in poetry, however, and not as an enemy of progress. See Chapter Two, pages 27 and 28. On the other hand, we find at almost the same time E. Walder and William Minto praising Johnson's flexibility and arguing that he had helped pave the way for what Minto calls "the splendid outburst of poetic production in a subsequent generation." See Chapter Two, pages 49-50 and 54. Edmund Gosse's remarks on Johnson and Warton, published a few years later, likewise reflect a growing emphasis on Johnson's alleged posture as an enemy of progress: "Warton [had] an enthusiasm for romance, a sense of something above and beyond the rules of critics, a breadth of real poetry undreamed of by Johnson. . . . Warton prophesied of a dawning age, and Johnson stiffly contented himself with the old." See Chapter One, page 16. By 1908, the question of Johnson's role in the transition has become so important to J. Churton Collins that he is willing to argue, albeit to the end of mitigating what he considers to be Johnson's mulish opacity to the merits of Collins and Gray, that Johnson had only one aim in writing the Lives of the Poets: to stave off the onrush of Romanticism. See Chapter Two, pages 65 and 66. When we get to Elton, Cazamian, Houston, Brown, Bosker, and Atkins, we will find that the question of Johnson's stance in reference to the coming of Romanticism has assumed a paramount importance.

[7]"The Authority of Johnson," September 2, 1926, p. 569.

[8]Ibid.

[9]There is a good chance that John Bailey is the reviewer. See Paul Elmer More, "How to Read Lycidas," American Review, VII (April 1936), 17-19.

[10]Dr. Johnson (London, 1928), p. 156. In all fairness, R. W. Chapman's review should be noted: "[Hollis] supposes that [the Lives of the Poets] are not much read now, and there is little reason to believe that Hollis had read them himself." Chapman goes on to insist that "whatever Johnson was not, he was assuredly a great scholar and a great critic." "Aspects of Johnson," TLS, September 20, 1928, p. 663. Chapman was not so sure of his ground on another occasion, however. See note 22 below.

[11]Dr. Johnson and Mr. Boswell (New York, 1929), p. 61. Salpeter's comment might lead one to infer that Boswell had something to do with obtaining Johnson's final resting place.

[12]Ibid., pp. 260 ff.

[13]Samuel Johnson (London, 1933), p. 208.

[14](London, 1955), p. vi.

[15]Ibid., p. 110.

[16]Ibid., pp. 148-49.

[17]Ibid., p. 150. If Joyce asserts a traditional objection, he also asserts a traditional corollary that Johnson's criticism is admirable even when erroneous: "It is very much easier to map out Johnson's limitations than to give a just idea of the critical excellences that adorn the Lives of the Poets. . . . Whatever point Johnson is making, it is made once and for all; we shall never find it more precisely or more cogently expressed. When he is led astray by his prejudices, these are so patent, and often so endearing, that we can laugh affectionately and apply the necessary correction" (pp. 150-151). A still more recent assertion of the time-honored idea that Johnson, though wrong, is superior to the critics who happen to be right is expressed by F. L. Lucas in The Search for Good Sense: Four Eighteenth Century Characters: Johnson, Chesterfield, Boswell, Goldsmith (London, 1958). Since Lucas starts out to support the idea that

Johnson is greater as a talker than as a writer, and since he prefaces his discussion of Johnson's criticism with the observation that "aesthetic tastes are merely subjective," his treatment of Johnson is something of a wild card in a study of this sort. However, the fact that he defends Johnson's criticism in the matter of the unities and mixed tragedy and comedy, as well as in the insistence on a middling kind of poetic diction, should be noted. Like Joyce, he rests his defense finally on an argument that had been familiar since Macaulay had advanced it in 1856: "Johnson may mistake the truth; but he does not fog it. He marches straight ahead, even when wrong; he does not stagger in circles, like a man lost in mist; and so we at least arrive somewhere. . . . And, after all, one does not really read him to learn more about poetry; one reads him to learn, and enjoy, more about himself. . . . In short, the virtue of Johnson's criticism, like the virtue of his original writing and his talk, lies mainly in the same two things (which are largely one) -- personality and style" (pp. 124-25).

[18]"The Independent Boswell and the Capricious Dr. Johnson," Quarterly Journal of the University of North Dakota, XXII (Fall 1931), 57.

[19]Collected Essays, Papers &c., III (London, 1928), 69.

[20]Six Essays on Johnson, pp. 28-29.

[21]"Johnson and Poetry," Saturday Review of Literature, VI (August 1929), 51.

[22]Ibid., p. 50. It is interesting in this connection to consider remarks which Chapman had offered almost a decade earlier on Johnson's criticism. Recognizing that Johnson the critic had, in 1921, almost no status, Chapman went on to say: "There is now among lovers of literature a disposition to believe that Johnson's works are more worth study than we were taught to suppose. We are no longer prepared without misgiving to discard . . . the Life of Milton as merely malignant; to dismiss the criticism of Gray as ineptitude, and the preface to Shakespeare as impertinence. Johnson's best books have only to be read, and read without prejudice, for their truth and beauty to throw off a tradition of false and invidious distinctions." "Johnson's Reputation," p. 554. But Chapman's response to Bridges' observations on Lycidas offers eloquent proof that what he calls "false and invidious distinctions" were not yet ready to be thrown off in 1929 -- not even, apparently, by himself.

[23]See Chapter Two, page 54.

[24]The Name and Nature of Poetry (Cambridge, 1933), p. 30. Charles Norman has recently accused Housman of ingratitude, claiming that Housman's style is clearly indebted to Johnson's "A Short Song of Congratulation." Mr. Oddity (London, 1952), pp. 334-335.

[25]"A Happy Legend," Saturday Review, CXLV (January 14, 1928), 32.

[26]"Samuel Johnson after a Century and a Half," Dalhousie Review, XIV (January 1935), 484.

[27]Ibid., p. 485.

[28]Ursa Major: a Study of Dr. Johnson and his Friends (London, 1946), p. 320.

[29]Books and Bipeds (New York, 1947), p. 202. Ironically, Starrett's essay originally appeared as a review of Krutch's Samuel Johnson.

[30]Modern English Literature, 1450-1959, with Additional Chapters by A. C. Ward, 3rd ed. (London, 1960), pp. 118-19. (First Edition, 1914).

[31]"Dr. Johnson Views our Poets," Dalhousie Review, XI (January 1932), 493.

[32]Ibid., pp. 498-99.

[33]"Samuel Johnson, Critic of Poetry," Queen's Quarterly, XXXIX (August 1932), 427.

[34]Ibid., p. 429.

[35]Eds. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, X (Cambridge, 1913), 203. Smith seems to have set the tone for twentieth century historians of Shakespeare criticism. As we shall see in Chapter Five, no other group of writers were so respectful toward Johnson in the period now under consideration.

[36]Ibid., p. 206.

[37]Ibid., pp. 208-09.

[38]Ibid., p. 203. Smith is, of course, referring primarily to Stendhal.

[39]Ibid., p. 209.

[40]Ibid.

[41]A Survey of English Literature, 1730-1780 (London, 1928), I, 142.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., p. 143.

[44]Ibid., p. 146.

[45]Ibid., pp. 140-42.

[46]Ibid., p. 124.

[47]Ibid., pp. 141-42.

[48]Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, A History of English Literature (New York, 1930), I, 837.

[49]Ibid., p. 839.

[50]Ibid., p. 836.

[51]Ibid., p. 837.

[52]"A Survey of Johnsonian Studies," p. 7.

[53](Cambridge, Mass., 1923), pp. 3-4.

[54]Ibid., p. 248.

[55]Ibid., pp. 50, 48, 79.

[56]Ibid., p. 252.

[57]Ibid., p. 248.

[58]Ibid., pp. 107-08.

[59]Ibid., p. 237.

[60]Ibid., p. 254.

[61](Princeton, 1926), p. 1.

[62]Ibid., p. xxxvi.

[63]Ibid., p. 1.

[64]Ibid., p. lii.

[65]Ibid., p. xxii.

[66]Ibid., p. xxvii.

[67]Ibid., p. xlii.

[68]Ibid., p. xxxix.

[69]Ibid., p. xxxi.

[70]Ibid., pp. xxvii-xxviii.

[71]See Chapter Two, note 4.

[72]See Chapter One, note 5.

[73]See Chapter Two, note 5.

[74]See Chapter Two, note 6.

[75]The Critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson, p. li.

[76]One of the most eminent of twentieth century Johnson scholars, Jean H. Hagstrum, has recently asserted that an awesome amount of research needs to be done before the question of Johnson's position can be settled: "The sources of Johnson's ideas and methods must be carefully established, as must a broad but precise context in all Western thought. The future student of Johnson's criticism should study not only other critical essays in English or other lives of poets but also the whole range of critical speculation classical and modern, English and Continental. And almost more important than purely critical sources, occasions and analogues

is the relation of Johnson's thought to logic, law, epistemology, rhetoric, and scholarship in Latin and English. Not until such an investigation has been thoroughly made will we be in a position to know whether Johnson fulfilled the neoclassical tradition or subverted it." "Preface, 1967," Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism (Chicago, 1967), pp. vii-viii.

[77]MP, XXII (May 1926), 498. Crane's comments have relevance because, as we shall have occasion to explain more fully in the following chapter, they are representative of his insistence over a long career that eighteenth century criticism be considered on its own merits rather than in terms of some arbitrary modern notion of a progress in criticism. Since Crane is widely acknowledged to have been the most feared reviewer of our time, it is not to be doubted that he was influential in fostering a more objective and favorable attitude not only toward Johnson but toward eighteenth century English criticism in general. Perhaps his most outspoken attack on the practice of scrutinizing eighteenth century criticism through a template of modern commonplaces is found in his review of a European study, Ellen Sigyn Christiani's Samuel Johnson als Kritiker im Lichte von Pseudo-Klassizimus und Romantik (Leipzig, 1931). It should be pointed out that, in explaining why Miss Christiani's study has small merit, Crane also explains why most twentieth century European studies of Johnson's criticism do not receive close attention in this investigation. After explaining that Miss Christiani's book is "mechanical and peculiarly unilluminating," Crane goes on to say: "The author has read in various old-fashioned textbooks or has been told by her professor that such and such opinions or interests or beliefs were essentially 'pseudo-classical' and such and such other opinions or interests or beliefs were 'romantic.' It has not occurred to her to test the historical validity of these formulae, still less to raise the question whether such crude and over-simplified categories are of any value for purposes of scholarly interpretation; she has accepted them without criticism and has proceeded to apply them to one after another of the passages in Johnson's published writings or in his recorded conversations in which he pronounces on the literary, moral, and religious issues of the day." "English Literature, 1660-1800: A Current Bibliography," PQ, XI (1932), 196. Crane's judgment that Miss Christiani's approach is naive seems well-grounded: "In seiner kritischen Grundhaltung war Samuel Johnson überzeugter Pseudoklassizist, der Normen der Ästhetik und des Schönen aufstellte und befolgte. Dadurch, dass er zugleich, eben aus seinem inneren persönlichen Streben nach Wahrheit und Unparteilichkeit heraus zu einer historischen Methode der Kritik kam, näherte er sich der Romantik. Er schätzte als Pseudoklassizist die französische Literatur und die Antike hoch ein, aber nie so hoch, dass er darüber die englische Literatur, und besonders die zeitgenössische englische Literatur vergessen hätte.

Er verehrt Boileau als Pseudoklassizist, hasst aus moralischer Überzeugung den Pseudoklassizisten Voltaire und lehnt Rousseau gerade darum ab, weil er seine reformatorischen Ideen zu Ende denkt und praktisch in die Wirklichkeit umsetzen will. Wo ein anderer den entscheidenden Schritt wagt, bleibt Johnson im Zwiespalt befangen" (p. 118). The point to be made in this connection is that Miss Christiani's study is far from atypical. Since most comparable European studies of Johnson are published doctoral dissertations, it is not surprising that they represent groping attempts to arrive at some rudimentary understanding of Johnson's significance. Accordingly, such studies have exerted no influence in the English-speaking world and thus hold little interest for us. Two of these should at least be mentioned, however. They are Robert Kleuker's Dr. Samuel Johnsons Verhältnis zur französichen Literatur (Strassburg, 1907), and Hans Meier's Dr. Samuel Johnsons Stellung zu den Literarischen Fragen seiner Zeit (Zurich, 1916). See also note 1, Chapter Four, for a brief consideration of Paul Hamelius' Die Kritik in der englischen Literatur des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts.

[78]"The Originality of Doctor Johnson," The Bookman, LXXVII (March 1930), 323.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Ibid., p. 324.

[81]"Dr. Johnson and Imagination," Southwest Review, XIII (October 1927), 26.

[82]Ibid., p. 34.

[83]Ibid., p. 28.

[84]Ibid., p. 29.

[85]"Dr. Johnson, Poetry, and Imagination," Neophilologus, XXIII (1938), 206.

[86]Ibid., p. 203.

[87]Ibid., pp. 206-07.

[88]Ibid., p. 204.

[89]Ibid.

[90]ELH, X (1943), 246.

[91]Ibid., p. 252.

[92]Ibid., p. 255.

[93](New York, 1944), p. 291.

[94]Actually, Krutch seems to have had ambivalent feelings about Johnson's criticism. In a radio panel discussion, around 1940, he said: "I know no great critic who is more often wrong, perhaps, but I also know no great critic who so perpetually has some point to make, something interesting to say." This statement is, in essence, a passable paraphrase of Macaulay's conclusion that, even at their worst, Johnson's critiques mean something. Mark Van Doren, appearing on the same broadcast, spoke up for Johnson in a somewhat less qualified manner: "He is a great literary critic -- I think he is one of the greatest of literary critics." But Van Doren also remarked that Johnson had been "outrageously unjust to Swift and Fielding." New Invitation to Learning, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York, 1942), pp. 295-296.

[95]Ibid., p. 322.

[96]Samuel Johnson, p. 473.

[97]Ibid., p. 493.

[98]Ibid., p. 494. Three specific estimates of Johnson's standing bracket Krutch's publication date and seem to illustrate rather dramatically that that publication date and the turning point in Johnson's twentieth century reputation do coincide closely. The first of these is made by Robert N. Lass, in 1942. It would be difficult to conceive of a more timid claim for a current Johnson revival than that which he advances. He suggests merely that most modern scholars would probably agree with the remarks on Johnson published some thirty years earlier by Stuart Teggart. Although Lass' study is scarcely well-documented, his estimate can be taken as a reflection of the climate of opinion then existing in at least one American institution of higher learning. "A Brief History of the Criticism of Dr. Johnson," p. 76. Fortunately, a more substantial witness is heard from at about the same time. Addressing a group in New Orleans in 1944 on the topic of "Johnson and Boswell Today," the late Roger McCutcheon, a revered former

teacher of this writer and a scholar who yielded to no man in his admiration of Johnson, spent the greater part of his time discussing the revaluation of Boswell which had come in the wake of the discovery of the Fettercairn and Malahide papers. Then he asked, rhetorically, if modern scholarship had undertaken a similar revaluation of Johnson. Although he perceived some life in Johnson the critic, McCutcheon did not reply in a manner which suggests that he saw a new day dawning: "On the whole, no . . . . The scholarly significance of Johnson's literary criticism has been made more apparent. We know more precisely the value of Johnson's edition of Shakespeare, as we can now trace several of Johnson's ideas back to earlier critics. . . . Scholarship and scholarly discoveries have not made as spectacular changes in our opinion of Johnson as of Boswell . . . but the number of quite respectable works on Johnson that have appeared in the last ten years is significant." Addresses Made Before the Friends of the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library of Tulane University (New Orleans, 1944), p. 23. Writing a mere three years later, however, James L. Clifford detected a pronounced change in the prevailing attitude toward Johnson the critic. Pointing specifically to Krutch's analyses of Johnson's criticism, as well as to the other recent discussions which we shall consider in the following chapter, Clifford virtually dared his readers to disagree that, as of 1947, Samuel Johnson the writer and critic was staging a spectacular come-back: "After this, whatever you may think of the arguments, can there be any doubt that the rehabilitation of Johnson . . . is in full swing? To repeat the old clichés that he is remembered only because of his conversation, or because of his powerful personality, is merely to show that one is behind the times." "Dr. Johnson as a Writer," Johnsonian News Letter, VII (May 1947), 4.

CHAPTER IV

1940 AND AFTER:

A CHECKERED CONCEPTION

In turning from Joseph Wood Krutch's Samuel Johnson to George Saintsbury's A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe, we are, of course, doubling back some forty years. Since Saintsbury's history supports the thesis that writers who spoke up in Johnson's behalf around the turn of the century valued his criticism more highly than writers (with the notable exception of T. S. Eliot) who entered the debate between 1910 and 1940, his discussion of Johnson's criticism might have been incorporated conveniently into an earlier chapter. Despite the fact that backtracking has serious disadvantages, however, it seems helpful to consider under one heading all major twentieth century historians of criticism, for such a stratagem has the obvious advantage of relating the question of Johnson's present-day reputation to the ideas of the several armed camps which have emerged to characterize criticism in our somewhat disjunctive literary milieu.[1] In this connection, it is a measure of how radical a change is represented in the transition from a criticism of connoisseurs such as Saintsbury to a criticism of modern analysts that one of the most widely respected of the latter, René Wellek, prefaces his own monumental A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950 with the observation that

Saintsbury's views, propounded a mere half century previously, are now virtually obsolete:

> The only existing book which covers our topic in extenso, George Saintsbury's History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe (3 vols. 1900-1904), while admirable in its sweep and still readable because of the liveliness of the author's exposition and style, is not only outdated by having been written fifty years ago, during the heyday of impressionism and art for art's sake, but seems to me seriously vitiated by its professed lack of interest in questions of theory and aesthetics.[2]

As we shall see, one of the more pronounced points of disagreement between Saintsbury and Wellek concerns the question of Johnson's usefulness as a critic. Curiously enough, Saintsbury, writing at a time when Johnson is thought to have had little if any following, assigns him a place "not often to be given to critics,"[3] whereas Wellek, writing in the midst of what is widely acclaimed to be a Johnson revival, deals with him as a critic whose views on literature are, if possible, even less valuable than those of Saintsbury. But Wellek's severe and no doubt influential estimate of Johnson's criticism is a matter to be deferred until later in this chapter. The writers we need to consider first are the twentieth century historians of criticism who, like so many of the writers encountered in the preceding chapter, have dealt with the eighteenth century as the gestation period of Romanticism, and the point to be stressed is that, of these, Saintsbury is far more appreciative of the intrinsic worth of Johnson's

criticism than are the more recent historians we turn to next, A. Bosker and J. W. H. Atkins.

It is not to be inferred, of course, that Saintsbury has no quarrel with Johnson. Indeed, he argues that a rigorous application of Johnson's requirement that the poet imitate only "general properties and large appearances" might disqualify every major English poet save Pope,[4] and he concludes his discussion of Johnson's ideas on prosody with the observation that "virtually every one of his axioms and postulates is questionable."[5] In addition, Saintsbury's estimate of Johnson's Shakespearean labors provides an interesting contrast to that of D. Nichol Smith, which was published in the same year, 1902. On the whole, Saintsbury judges the edition to have been a failure and cites the Preface as an illustration

> not merely of Johnson's native critical vigour . . . but of that peculiar position of compromise and reservation which . . . is at once the condemnation and the salvation of the English critical position at this time. . . . throughout the piece it is now Johnson himself who is speaking, now some one with a certain bundle of principles or prejudices which Johnson chooses to adopt for the time.[6]

Generally speaking, then, Saintsbury's judgment of Johnson's earlier criticism seems more severe than otherwise; the weather clears, however, once he turns to the Lives of the Poets. Despite his belief that the Lives of Milton, Swift, and Gray are distorted by prejudice of one sort or another,[7] Saintsbury designates the Lives of the Poets as "one of the most fortunate

books in English literature"[8] and goes on to discuss the criticism of the Lives in a manner which lends credence to his final estimate of Johnson not only as the "eighteenth-century orthodox critic in quintessence [but] in transcendence also."[9] Although he warns that it is not safe to neglect even one of the Lives, Saintsbury acknowledges that there are a few which do, in fact, "take precedence of the rest," notably the Lives of Cowley, Dryden and Pope.[10] Concerning the first, he raises an objection to Matthew Arnold's edition of the Six Chief Lives which we have encountered before:

> Only that singular impatience of literary history, as such, which characterized the late Mr. Matthew Arnold, and which not infrequently marred his own critical work, can have prevented him from including, in his Johnsonian points de repère, the Essay which launched, and endeavoured to make watertight, the famous definition of the "Metaphysical" School.[11]

Granted its date and the stature of the writer, this comment reflects surprising respect toward a critic who is popularly thought to have been the object of almost universal scorn at the time. But what Saintsbury has to say about the Lives of Dryden and Pope is even less restrained. He designates them as "a pair of the best critical Essays in the English language"[12] and makes it amply clear that he is not of the school which classifies Dryden and Pope as prose writers.[13]

It is equally clear, however, that Saintsbury writes about Johnson with an eye on the English Romantics, whom he unapologetically holds to

be the greatest critics produced by any race or age.[14] As suggested above, he gives a significant amount of attention to Johnson's role as a transitional critic, going so far in this regard as to designate the conclusion of Johnson's discussion of mixed comedy and tragedy in Rambler 156 as "in effect the death-knell of the neo-classic system, sounded by its last really great prophet."[15] Moreover, he notes that the insight displayed in this essay and elsewhere in Johnson's criticism constitutes proof that Johnson "might have taken high, if not the highest, degrees in a very different school of criticism."[16] But Saintsbury's emphasis is on the quality of Johnson's critical insight rather than on the role of that insight in unlocking the gates for the critics of the next generation. Therefore, unlike many of the writers whom we examined in the preceding chapter and J. W. H. Atkins, whom we turn to in a moment, he regards the intellectual vision which, in his opinion, enabled Johnson to transcend the "limitations" of Neoclassical criticism not as a means to an end but rather as the identifying characteristic of the great critic in any age:

> He has seen what others refused -- perhaps were unable -- to see, and what some flatly denied,-- that a process of literary judgment "by the event" is possible, and that its verdicts, in some respects at any rate, cannot be challenged or reversed. These great critical aperçus, though sometimes delivered half unwillingly or on the wrong side, establish Johnson's claim to a place not often to be given to critics; but they do not establish it more certainly than his surveys of his actual subjects.[17]

Here, Saintsbury is obviously close in spirit to those writers cited in Chapter Two who took exception to most of Johnson's decisions but argued at the same time that he was more enlightening and valuable than other critics whose decisions they found more congenial. For Saintsbury, Johnson's clarity of vision and unswerving fidelity to his own critical principles identify him as a "Caesar [who] never does wrong but with just cause"[18] and whose decisions are therefore to be regarded as less important than the light given off by his decision-making process:

> Now, this is it which makes the greatness of a critic. That Johnson might have been greater still at other times need not necessarily be denied; though it is at least open to doubt whether any other time would have suited his whole disposition better. But, as he is, he is great. . . . His critical calculus is perfectly sound on its own postulates and axioms; and you have only to apply checks and correctives (which are easily ascertained, and kept ready) to adjust it to absolute critical truth. And, what is more, he has not merely flourished and vapoured critical abstractions, but has left us a solid reasoned body of critical judgment; he has not judged literature in the exhausted receiver of mere art, and yet has never neglected the artistic criterion; he has kept in constant touch with life, and yet has never descended to mere gossip. We may freely disagree with his judgments, but we can never justly disable his judgment; and this is the real criterion of a great critic.[19]

Compared to Saintsbury's expansive and flexible estimate of Johnson's criticism, that of A. Bosker, advanced some thirty years later, seems virtually incapable of recognizing criteria of critical excellence other than those reflected in the work of the English Romantics. Bosker's study,

Literary Criticism in the Age of Johnson, was first published in 1930 and then in a second edition in 1953 with the author's assurance that

> [n]either my own further investigations in the field of eighteenth-century criticism, nor the perusal of the many valuable contributions to its history that have appeared during the last twenty years, have led me to conclusions substantially different from those laid down in the concluding chapter of the first edition.[20]

In essence, the conclusions which Bosker alludes to stem from his rigid conviction that the transition from Neoclassical to Romantic values in poetry and criticism represents progress in the most attractive sense of the word. In this connection, his explanation of how the critics of the eighteenth century had fallen away from the light is, to say the least, uncomplicated:

> Reason had been the dominating force ever since the middle of the seventeenth century and under its powerful sway emotional and imaginative elements had been repressed, the old spontaneity of the Elizabethans had fled the domain of art, and the artistic expression of deep personal feelings had come to be looked upon with distrust.[21]

With this premise laid down, Bosker proceeds to depict eighteenth century English criticism as a struggle between rationalists, of whom Johnson is his most notable example, and the (to him) more enlightened critics who endeavored to restore "the essential elements of poetic art to their proper places [and to free criticism] from the restraints of common sense."[22] It will be apparent that Bosker is close to Irving Babbitt in assuming the major

impetus of the revolt against Neoclassicism to have been the efforts of some eighteenth century writers to rehabilitate the concept of the creative imagination. As a consequence, he obviously cannot allow Johnson a place with the Wartons, Hurd, Young, Twining, and Hoole on the side of the angels. Indeed, he is rather hard pressed to grant Johnson any favorable recognition at all beyond observing that he had been less prone than some of his colleagues to place his complete trust in classical authority:

> [Johnson's] strong individuality, the sanity and independence of his judgment, made it impossible for him to submit to such a narrow code as that of the pseudo-classicists. Johnson's shortcomings as a literary critic are not the result of an implicit faith in pre-conceived standards but rather of a too rigid application of reason to aesthetic problems, of which a rational explanation cannot always be given.[23]

Bosker leaves no doubt in his reader's mind that, to his way of thinking, "rigid application of reason to aesthetic problems" is a hanging offense in a literary critic, and what he often seems to object to under the heading of Johnson's rationalism is nothing more or less than a critic's disinclination to accept spontaneous outbursts of individual sentiment as the last word in poetry:

> Johnson's love of truth drove him into opposition to the sentimental revolt that rose as a reaction against the long-lived sway of reason. The strong tidal wave of individualism, the personal way of looking at life which characterized the resurrection of romanticism, found no favour with the critic who had laid so much stress on the necessity for the poet to depict the general aspects of human nature.[24]

Like some of the writers noted at the outset of Chapter Three, Bosker cites Johnson's sympathetic treatment of Pope to support the contention that "Johnson's insistence on reason as the sole criterion by which literary art should be tested made him an incompetent judge of aesthetic qualities for which it is impossible to find a strictly rational foundation."[25] The plain implication is that Johnson could admire only that poetry in which aesthetic qualities of the sort Bosker has in mind are largely nonexistent, and that therefore both the critic and poetry he found congenial are to be considered banished, permanently, by the poets and critics of the following age who had restored those aesthetic qualities to their proper place:

> When imagination and emotion had come into their own again, the criteria of truth and nature in the pseudo-classical sense of the words lost their influential positions. Critics began to see how much harm had been done to poetry by the abuse of rationalism, they felt that the mere understanding is an inadequate test for the higher truth of art.[26]

It should be recognized, perhaps, that Bosker's aplomb in publishing a relatively unchanged second edition of Literary Criticism in the Age of Johnson is quite impressive in view of what R. S. Crane had to say about the first edition. Generally speaking, Crane believed that "the formulae [Bosker] proposes give a distorted and in the main unreal impression of the phenomena with which his book attempts to deal."[27] Specifically, Crane suggests that Bosker's reduction of seventeenth and eighteenth century criticism to a running battle between the forces of reason and the forces of imagination

stemmed from "a set of prepossessions about the ruling aesthetic philosophy of the immediately preceding period which, though still widely held, are nevertheless open to serious doubt."[28] More to our purpose, perhaps, Crane assessed Bosker's chapter on Johnson as "in point of knowledge and insight, hardly above the capacity of a beginning graduate student."[29]

But if Crane was dissatisfied with the formulae proposed by Bosker, he was still less satisfied with those proposed by J. W. H. Atkins in his English Literary Criticism: 17th and 18th Centuries, which was published in 1951. As most readers will be aware, Atkins' book elicited Crane's most thorough statement of his own ideas as to how the history of eighteenth century criticism should be written. Like Bosker, Atkins clearly started from the premise that the shift from the essentially rational and rule-oriented criticism of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to the intuitive and appreciative criticism of the early nineteenth century constituted a phenomenon in which all enlightened men could rejoice. Unlike Bosker, however, he did not depict Johnson as an enemy of progress but rather as a rebellious and liberalizing influence who hastened the dawning of a better age. Crane's basic objection is that Atkins' conclusions tended to rise not from the texts under consideration but from the prior assumptions which he had brought to the study of those texts. Indeed, Crane argued that such a history as Atkins had produced could be written

> only when you have hit upon a comprehensive formula for your period as a whole that will allow you to make

> unified and coherent sense out of the otherwise chaotic mass of doctrines you have extracted from the texts. You must have this in some form, indeed, before you can set to work at all, or you will not know how to select from the many things each of your critics may be saying those relatively few things which can be included in your book. You cannot induce the formula from the facts but must bring it to them.[30]

In his view, the formula which Atkins had brought to his task was the conviction that

> progress in criticism consists in moving in any direction that is the contrary of any of the narrow and erroneous doctrines about poetry and criticism which you have identified with the "creed" of French neoclassicism in its most "rigid" form, as represented by Boileau, Rapin, and Bossu.[31]

One obvious weakness of such an approach, in Crane's opinion, lay in the necessity of distorting or at the very least oversimplifying the ideas of eighteenth century criticism in order to fit them into the historian's preconceived scheme. Crane cited the discussion of Johnson as a prime example of the mistaken representation which must inevitably arise from Atkins' method:

> [I]f you are to show, as Professor Atkins is bent on doing, that most of the English critics who wrote after Boileau, Bossu, and Rapin were attempting to emancipate themselves from the restricted views and "cold intellectualism" of that school, you must obviously define the "orthodoxy" they were challenging in terms that will not include any of the doctrines or opinions you fix upon as indications of the more "liberal" attitudes that were emerging during the period. The plausibility of the story which Professor Atkins tells would thus be seriously impaired if he

> were not able to insist . . . that the opening argument of Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare, with its reference of literary judgment to "length of duration and continuance of esteem" is an indication that he had come under the new emancipating influence of Longinus (pp. 237-8); or that Johnson was helping to "dispose" of neo-classicism when he condemned "mere formal 'imitation' of earlier masterpieces" and asserted that "No man as yet ever became great by imitation" (p. 358). . . . The truth of all these statements is guaranteed, for Professor Atkins, by his account of the neo-classical "orthodoxy" in his opening chapter; but unfortunately there is not one among the pronouncements he here singles out as "liberal" or revolutionary that would have been disputed by any critic of importance in antiquity or the Renaissance, and not one that cannot be found in Rapin himself.[32]

A still more serious weakness of Atkins' method, and one which is perhaps more clearly relevant to our study of Johnson's modern reputation as a critic, likewise inhered in the process of dismembering the critic's arguments and reassembling them within the historian's frame of reference. In Crane's opinion, the invariable result of such a procedure was to reduce the critic from a vital force to a museum piece:

> [I]f you confine yourself, in your statements about particular critics and their writings, merely to the explicit content of what is said, you are bound to reduce their arguments to a series of discrete assertions or denials, about generalized and commonplace topics, the great majority of which can have no serious interest in themselves for readers in a later age, when these topics no longer represent the questions we think important. It is doubtless well to know what Johnson, for instance, had to say about the desirability that critics should read the works they comment on, or about the value of the test of time, or about the evils of imitation, or about the limited authority of the

> unities of time and place, or about the genius of English versification, or about the use of general terms in poetry, or about romances and novels, or about the distinctive merits and defects of the various poets dealt with in the Lives -- to mention but a few of the heads under which Professor Atkins groups Johnson's critical "pronouncements"; but as atomized in his treatment, all such opinions can have for us only the value of examination knowledge in critical antiquities; and we wonder how anyone can be thought a great critic who has to his credit, on the reading of the historian, only such a mass of miscellaneous platitudes or queer and outdated ideas.[33]

It should not be inferred, however, that Atkins' approach to his subject is anything but conscious and deliberate. He announces at the outset that the period he intends to investigate "forms as it were the bridge between the early strivings of the Renascence period and the great achievements of the 19th-Century," and then he frankly admits a few pages later that it is "[n]ot without justice [that] the criticism of this period has been described as one long attempt to escape from a false position adopted at the beginning of the period."[34] Yet he is also clearly determined to upgrade Johnson's reputation, and it need hardly be said that the assumptions he brings to this task are as helpful to his efforts as an anvil might be to those of a long-distance swimmer. Hence his summing-up of standard complaints about Johnson's criticism is particularly interesting owing to his inability to make any of them sound really uncongenial:

> [S]ince his day [Johnson] has been subjected to some surprising judgments, perhaps more so than any other of the great critics. If not actually abused, he has been

> presented, more often than not, in apologetic fashion, with much confident explanation of his manifold defects; the chief complaint being that he lacked the sympathetic imaginative temperament for revealing the finer literary effects, and so failed to let us into the secrets of the poetic appeal. But this is by no means the whole trouble; his criticism has also been said to suffer from sundry prejudices, from a narrow conception of what poetry really is, as well as from his methods of forming and pronouncing judgment; while he has also been denounced as a rigid moralist and a determined foe of all innovation. Apart from this, further alleged defects have been gathered from isolated fragments of his doctrine and judgments, which, torn from their context and therefore distorted, have been accepted as a sound basis for a final evaluation. Thus he has been grouped, for instance, among the neo-classical critics; for did he not make use of Bossu's categories in his treatment of Milton? Or again, that he was surely lacking in the historical sense was held to be indicated by his references to the "savagery" of Elizabethan times, and his want of sympathy with yet earlier periods of English poetry. Then, too, there were those unhappy comments on Lycidas and Gray; and besides all this, to his judgments in general he brought as his tests settled principles of his own, whereas the enlightened critics of a later day sought the touchstone of excellence in the work of the poet itself. So that, altogether, despite substantial work in connexion with Shakespeare and other English poets, he created in the minds of some the impression of an obtuse, dogmatic, and ponderous critic, who hindered, for the time being, an aesthetic appreciation of literature, and was in fact little more than a prosaic critic in an age of prose.[35]

Surely, Atkins tells us, this lengthy indictment must be regarded as "but a superficial and shallow judgment," one which no doubt has gained what he assumes to be its wide currency because its formulators have viewed their subject in the light of "19th-Century theory and practice"

rather than the theory and practice of the preceding age. Atkins makes it clear, however, that his approach to Johnson will represent no radical departure from the one he condemns, for he tells us that, to be judged aright, Johnson must be viewed "against an 18th-Century background with its special problems and its shortened horizon where poetry was concerned."[36] Obviously, the literary critic whose rehabilitation is to take place within a context of shortened poetic horizons is not destined for transfiguration, and Atkins is forced to concede at once that Johnson did indeed have serious defects. As a matter of fact, he goes on to admit that almost every one of the traditional objections which he has just taken note of is valid, and, as might be expected, he concludes with the most damning admission of all:

> Over and above all this, however, was his reliance on Nature or reason as his main instrument for forming literary judgment, "imagination" being to him mere "fancy". It was a test which was tantamount to the prose understanding or good sense, with its "intuitive perception of what was fitting" and in accordance with the demands of human nature; but it was also one which, in the absence of an imaginative element, fell short of being the highest aesthetic touchstone, and could not but fail to sound the deeper mysteries of the literary art.[37]

How does Atkins intend to upgrade the reputation of a critic who is unable to "sound the deeper mysteries of art"? Granted the controlling idea of his history, as Crane's comments reveal, there is only one avenue open to him, and he proceeds to argue that Johnson was not, after all, "a determined foe of all innovation." On the contrary, Atkins not only depicts

Johnson as a critic who had an admirably flexible attitude toward change and an iconoclastic contempt for arbitrary and restrictive rules, but also insists that he is a great critic because he hastened the arrival of the day when "the critical spirit, having left the region of the pure intellect, [could soar] freely in the realm of the imagination."[38] It should be made clear, perhaps, that this discussion of Johnson's criticism is far more comprehensive and appreciative than that of A. Bosker. Unlike that writer, Atkins does make a concerted attempt to establish the idea that Johnson's criticism has intrinsic value. In the end, however, his discussions almost invariably come to rest in the contention that the Johnsonian work in question is important primarily because it paves the way for the more enlightened work of later critics.[39] Finally, we are left with the impression of a critic whose ideas about literature as a guide to living have some marginal usefulness in our time but whose real claim to greatness lies in the fact that he is

> a master who helped in changing the current of critical ideas . . . in critical history. Having made use of psychological tests and having revealed incidentally the limits of the prose understanding for critical purposes, he unconsciously prepared the way for the later triumphs of those who made imagination or the higher reason their criterion of poetic values. And for this and other reasons his claims to greatness as a critic admit of no dispute; even though he was one who, "attaining his full purpose, lost himself in his own lustre".[40]

In summing up our discussion of English Literary Criticism: 17th

and 18th Centuries, we should perhaps make it clear why Crane's comments on Atkins have been juxtaposed with Atkins' comments on Johnson. In the first place, as noted earlier, we should not overlook an opportunity to emphasize Crane's influence in bringing on a revival of Johnson's criticism in the years following World War II. His repeated insistence over a long career that eighteenth century criticism be studied from the inside, in terms of "why it was that . . . various critics took the particular positions they did," rather than from the outside, "in terms of the historian's superior knowledge of what is true and relevant in criticism," obviously cleared the way for important "inside" studies of Johnson's criticism by W. R. Keast, Jean Hagstrum, and M. H. Abrams.[41] Secondly, and more to the point, Crane's review is cited at some length because it embodies the best explanation extant of the kind of trap which writers on Johnson's criticism tended to fall into between 1910 and 1940. It is not suggested, of course, that Atkins' attitude toward Johnson is identical to that of Oliver Elton, Louis Cazamian, Percy Hazen Houston, Joseph Epes Brown, or A. Bosker, or indeed that his history dates from the nineteen-twenties or thirties. Yet it is obvious that Atkins shares the almost evangelical conviction of these earlier writers that the history of English criticism between the accession of Charles II and that of Victoria is a story which, like many a nineteenth century novel, proceeds naturally from the most deplorable of beginnings to the happiest of endings. Granted such an a priori belief, no writer could represent Johnson

as anything but a minor figure. It did not really matter, therefore, whether he depicted Johnson as an enemy of progress, after the fashion of Bosker, or as a liberalizing influence who had given criticism a helpful shove in the right direction, after the fashion of Atkins. The upshot was the same: when criticism emerged into the sunlight, where the imagination was presumed to soar again, Johnson remained behind in darkness, his limited purposes either fulfilled or frustrated, depending on the point of view operative.

An effort was made in the preceding chapter to demonstrate that the approach which we have just been considering is far more characteristic of the nineteen-twenties and thirties than of the Victorian period, and it was argued at that time that the growing concern over Johnson's role as a transitional critic during these years is one of the factors which foster the impression that his reputation as a critic actually suffered something of a decline after 1910. The discussion just concluded clearly supports the idea of such a decline. It may be recalled on this point that, in the review cited above, R. S. Crane simply equates Atkins' approach to eighteenth century criticism with that which Saintsbury had used some fifty years earlier. Yet this equation does not seem altogether fair to Saintsbury, whose scheme was, after all, far more flexible. To be sure, he makes no bones about the fact that his history was built on the idea of a progress of criticism culminating in the work of the English Romantics. As we have seen, however, he was not so restricted by this idea that he could not employ other criteria along the way,

and, as a consequence, Johnson emerges from his pages as a great critic whose best work simply transcends its time and therefore remains a permanent source of illumination in the world of letters. No comparable figure emerges from the pages of Bosker and Atkins. Although these writers also pursued their task with one eye on the triumphs of nineteenth century English criticism, they lacked the flexibility to admit of triumphs of another sort along the way, and so they were able to concede to Johnson only a strictly limited historical significance.

The focus of this chapter is not the idea of a Johnsonian decline after 1910, however, but rather the question of his standing at the present time. A few pages back it was acknowledged that Atkins' history obviously cannot be classified with works published in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. Although his ideas do seem highly congenial to those years, his book was published, after all, in 1951. To be sure, important writers have warned that, at the time of its publication, Atkins' history was obsolete owing to the fact that he had apparently ignored virtually all of the scholarly writing on his subject which had accrued between 1920 and 1950.[42] The corrective value of such warnings is at best marginal, however, and the fact remains that Atkins' English Literary Criticism: 17th and 18th Centuries is a lively, entertaining and popular book. Moreover, it should be recalled at this point that Bosker's Literary Criticism in the Age of Johnson was published in an unapologetic second edition in 1953. Certainly we cannot afford to ignore

the fact that two recent histories of eighteenth century English criticism -- at least one of which must be recognized as having some influence -- are dominated by a formula which is far more deleterious to Johnson's claim to a place with the greatest critics than anything devised by the Victorians. The fact that this formula seems to stem more from the early twentieth than from the nineteenth century is, of course, less important to our present purpose than the fact that it continues to affect Johnson's reputation in a visibly adverse way.

* * * *

During the time between Saintsbury and Atkins, other ideas were, of course, in the air, and Johnson the critic was evaluated from points of view radically different from those which we have just been considering. One new point of view which clearly gave Johnson's reputation a boost is more or less common to three of the greatest authorities in twentieth century literature: T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and Edmund Wilson. The first of the three to speak up in Johnson's behalf was T. S. Eliot, perhaps the most important and influential critic of this century and certainly the most important to defend Johnson's criticism in the years between the World Wars. In view of his well-known insistence on an objectivity in poetry amounting to depersonalization, and an equally well-known proclivity to view literature as a spontaneous order which adjusts itself from time to time to accommodate new masterpieces, Eliot's approach to Johnson was not obstructed by either

of the two major stumbling blocks which, as we have seen, confounded so many writers on Johnson's criticism in the first half of this century. The idea that each poet's inner response to human experience was to be revered as a probably source of ineffable truth is, in fact, one of the assumptions which Eliot found most objectionable in the Romantic tradition as it survived into his own day, and in any event the idea of a progress in criticism culminating in such a purely subjective point of view did not relate to his own way of looking at literature. Although it is difficult to estimate the influence of Eliot's support on Johnson's reputation, it seems safe to assume that his opinions have been important. Indeed, even if he had not written on Johnson so favorably, Eliot's precise and authoritative application of the wrecking ball to Romantic stereotypes during the first half of the twentieth century would have to be recognized as a prime factor in the recent revival of Johnson's criticism.

But Eliot did in fact write favorably on that criticism and his affinity with his great predecessor continues to be a subject of scholarly interest. In a valuable essay entitled "Dr. Johnson and Modern Criticism," written almost two decades ago, Edward Emley observes almost as a matter of course that "Eliot, with good cause, fancies himself en rapport with Johnson . . . [and] shares Johnson's notions of the office of critic."[43] More recently, Sean Lucy writes that, although it is difficult (apart from "the evident debt to Arnold") to trace Eliot's ideas back to specific sources,

influence of a general sort is easy to see:

> The closest to him in spirit, of the great English critics, are Dryden and Johnson -- who, in fact, are far closer in many ways than Arnold. Their attitudes to the actual tasks of criticism are as specialized and austere as that of Eliot and have almost certainly had some effect on his work. Both share his concern for the quality of writing as such; both of them employ the methods of comparison and analysis in very much the same way as he does himself. Both have, as he has, a certain grave authority of tone.[44]

Still more recently, John Mowat has attempted to establish a far more specific relationship between the two critics. He points to clues in Eliot's earliest criticism which he finds sufficient to support the belief that from the very beginning Johnson was a profound influence on Eliot's critical thinking. For instance, he maintains that, when Eliot

> [advocates] a passage in Dr. Johnson's Life of Cowley to the readers of his Introduction to the first edition of The Sacred Wood, [he] slips into the manner of the eighteenth century critic . . . [his] remark distinctly echoes the tone and cadence of the critic prescribed, and, whether it was Eliot's intention or not, Johnson's voice is unmistakeably [sic] heard in Eliot's sentence.[45]

Moreover, Mowat argues that Johnson exerted a more complex influence in Eliot's famous review of H. J. C. Grierson's Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century than has been heretofore recognized. It will be instantly recalled that, in this most influential of twentieth century critical essays, Eliot introduces Johnson (whom he could scarcely avoid) for the purpose of taking exception to his conclusions about metaphysical poetry;

however, he challenges Johnson with a gingerly demeanor bespeaking profound respect and insists that "we must not reject the criticism of Johnson (a dangerous person to disagree with) without having mastered it, without having assimilated the Johnsonian canons of taste."[46] Mowat contends that Johnson's influence is reflected not only in explicit references and the deferential attitude of the writer but in the structure of the essay as well: "The close attention Eliot pays to Johnson in this essay is more than one of reference; he is reading the metaphysical poets with certain passages from the Life of Cowley very firmly in his mind; it is as much a comment on Johnson as it is on Donne and his followers."[47]

In Mowat's view, the presence of these Johnsonian echoes in Eliot's criticism is explained by the fact that Johnson's ideas about general nature and Eliot's theory of a dissociation of sensibility in poetry have a common locus in the ideal of a unified culture. In support of such a common locus, Mowat cites Iris Murdoch's interpretation of Eliot's theory as a symbol "of the loss . . . of a unified world" and Walter Jackson Bate's observation that Johnson's "use of the word 'mind' anticipates Eliot's protest against 'the dissociation of sensibility.'"[48] In addition, he points to the insistence of both critics on a poetry which is capable of speaking to all men equally:

> There are . . . in Eliot's thinking, signs of a tension that is not very different from Johnson's; if Johnson stresses the fact that poetry should be of such a nature

> that it can appeal to the common humanity of all men, Eliot places his emphasis on the process by which the poet reaches this generality: both critics thus differ only in direction of emphasis, and not in essentials. The tension or conflict of opposites in the mind of each springs from a concern with the living element in literature; and the measure of the greatness of these two critics can be gauged by their attempt to resolve that tension which gives literature its protean quality.[49]

Obviously, Mowat's efforts to trace the basic ideas of these two critics to a common stem cannot fail to intrigue us, for, as Eliot himself observes, "we are always impressed by a reputation for influence, as influence is a form of power."[50] Yet even if we are unable or unwilling to see as much of Johnson in Eliot's criticism as he sees, we are obliged to recognize what Mowat is on target in identifying Johnson's appeal to Eliot with the idea of cultural unity. Although Mowat fails to deal with the most important question which his discussion raises -- a matter which we will take up a few pages further along -- he is unquestionably right when he points out that Eliot "has difficulty in concealing a wish for some kind of standard which he finds so enviably displayed in Johnson and his age."[51] Specifically, what Eliot finds most rewarding in Johnson is an example of a critic at work within an homogeneous culture. In fact, it is precisely in his attitude toward Johnson's cultural milieu that Eliot's approach differs so radically from that of so many other writers whom we have examined in this and the preceding chapter: what the others had condescended to as a context of shortened poetic horizons Eliot obviously sees as a cultural

solidarity which allowed Johnson to practice a criticism which was "purely literary." In his first extended remarks on Johnson's criticism in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, published in 1933, Eliot speculated that, without what had been popularly described for over a hundred years as the limitations of his age, Johnson could not have been so great a critic as, in Eliot's mind, he undoubtedly was:

> [T]here is a philosophic borderline, which you must not transgress too far or too often, if you wish to preserve your standing as a critic, and are not prepared to present yourself as a philosopher, metaphysician, sociologist, or psychologist instead. Johnson, in these respects, is a type of critical integrity. Within his limitations, he is one of the great critics; and he is a great critic partly because he keeps within his limitations. When you know what they are, you know where you are. Considering all the temptations to which one is exposed in judging contemporary writing, all the prejudices which one is tempted to indulge in judging writers of the immediately preceding generation, I view Johnson's Lives of the Poets as a masterpiece of the judicial bench. . . . We shall have, in the nineteenth century, several vagaries to contemplate, of critics who do not so much practise criticism as make use of it for other purposes. For Johnson poetry was still poetry, and not another thing. Had he lived a generation later, he would have been obliged to look more deeply into the foundations, and so would have been unable to leave us an example of what criticism ought to be for a civilisation which, being settled, has no need, while it lasts, to enquire into the function of its parts.[52]

Eliot turned to this same theme a decade later. As Mowat observes, however, there is a noticeable change in his tone. The later essay "shows

a marked drop in confidence . . . [the] emphatic note is missing; the barely disguised leaning towards Johnson is underlined by a certain note of humility."[53] It seems clear enough that the note of humility which Mowat detects in this essay has its roots in Eliot's increased emphasis on the radical disparity between Johnson's cultural milieu and his own. Eliot acknowledges that he 'is primarily occupied" with the task of trying to reduce some of the obstacles to the appreciation of Johnson as a critic"[54] and seems painfully aware that the most formidable of these is precisely that circumstance which he himself finds most valuable -- the fact that Johnson wrote criticism, and apparently was content to write criticism, within a settled society. Eliot, recognizing at the outset that such a relationship between critic and society is an alien concept to the mid-twentieth century, attempts to explain why it has placed Johnson at a disadvantage with modern readers:

> One reason for indifference to [Johnson's] criticism, is that he was not the initiator of any poetic movement. . . . Dryden, and Coleridge in partnership with Wordsworth, represent for us something new in poetry in their time. What Dryden wrote about poetry is therefore more exciting than what Johnson wrote. In his critical essays, he was outlining laws of writing for two generations to come: Johnson's view is retrospective. Dryden, concerned with defending his own way of writing, proceeds from the general to the particular: he affirms principles, and criticizes particular poets only in illustration of his argument; Johnson, in the course of criticizing the work of particular poets -- and of poets whose work was ended -- is led to generalizations. Their historical situations were quite different. It is not, in the long run, relevant to our judgment of an

> author's greatness, whether he comes at the beginning of an age or at the end; but we are inclined to favour unduly the former.[55]

As Mowat observes, Eliot is more willing in this later essay than he had been ten years previously to concede that Johnson's cultural milieu had embodied serious limitations. Eliot points specifically to two of these limitations: the lack of a historic sense which had rendered Johnson and many of his colleagues incapable of appreciating canons of taste other than their own,[56] and religious limitations which had precluded a discrimination "between the religious poetry of public worship, and the religious poetry of private experience."[57] But he continues to insist that

> Johnson was in a position, as no critic of equal stature has been since, to write purely literary criticism, just because he was able to assume that there was a general attitude towards life, and a common opinion as to the place of poetry in it.[58]

Needless to say, the problem which Eliot is attempting to solve stems from the fact that the "general attitude towards life" which Johnson shared with his readers has broken up, and it is clear that he views the resulting intrusion of extra-literary considerations into the criticism of poetry as a part of a general deterioration of civilization. Moreover, he recognizes that the process is irreversible and perhaps also that the gulf which separates Johnson the critic from the twentieth century reader is unbridgeable. It is difficult to read any really hopeful signs in his discussion of the decline of criticism following the publication of the Lives of the Poets:

[I]t is remarkable that Johnson's Lives of the Poets is the only monumental collection of critical studies of English poets in the language, with a coherence, as well as an amplitude, which no other English criticism can claim. It is worth while asking ourselves why no later work of criticism is of the same kind. Nineteenth century criticism, when it has not belonged primarily to the category of scholarly research, the presentation of the ascertainable facts about one author or another, has tended to be something less purely literary. With Coleridge, criticism merges into philosophy and a theory of aesthetics; with Arnold, it merges into ethics and propaedeutics, and literature becomes a means towards the formation of character; in some critics, of whom Pater is a specimen, the subject-matter of criticism becomes a pretext of another kind. In our own day, the influence of psychology and of sociology upon literary criticism has been very noticeable. On the one hand, these influences of social discipline have enlarged the field of the critic, and have affirmed, in a world which otherwise is inclined to depreciate the importance of literature, the relations of literature to life. But from another point of view this enrichment has also been an impoverishment, for the purely literary values, the appreciation of good writing for its own sake, have become submerged when literature is judged in the light of other considerations. That this has happened, must not be attributed either for approval or disparagement to individual critics. It is simply that the conditions under which literature is judged simply and naturally as literature and not another thing, no longer prevail. For such judgment of literature to be the normal and natural task of the critic, a settled society is necessary; a definite and limited public, in the midst of which there would be a smaller number of persons of taste and discrimination, with the same background of education and manners. It must be a society which believes in itself, a society in which the differences of religious and political views are not extreme. Only in such a society can the standard of a common style of good writing become established and unquestioned. That is the kind of society

> for which Johnson wrote. It is evidence of the change of society, accelerated in our own time, a change which brings inevitably a change in the consciousness of the literary critic himself, that in attempting to explain, to myself and to my audience, the peculiar interest of Johnson's criticism, I am forced to put myself at a point of view so very different from his own, and intrude the suggestion of social background which has become the necessary concern of criticism.[59]

As Eliot states it, the problem simply defies solution. How can a criticism which is so interwoven in the fabric of a coherent culture of the past be made relevant to an age which is seemingly devoid of anything resembling a sense of community? Eliot is clearly aware that the impetus of modern society is centrifugal and that a fragmented society can only produce a fragmented literature which by its very nature tends to idealize not a common style but radical uniqueness of style. Furthermore, he is aware of what happens to criticism when originality in the sense of uniqueness becomes the one and only guiding light: "originality . . . may cease to be virtue at all; and when several poets, and their respective groups of admirers, cease to have in common any standards of versification, any identify of taste or of tenets of belief, criticism may decline to an advertisement of preference."[60] Nevertheless, he endeavors to face the problem squarely and, at the same time, to strike an affirmative note:

> The conclusion that no work comparable to The Lives of the Poets could be written to-day, should not lead us either to elevate Johnson to a pinnacle, and lament the decline of civility which makes such

> criticism impossible; nor should it on the other hand tempt us to treat these essays merely as a curiosity of no bearing upon our actual problems. Their first value is a value which all study of the past should have for us: that it should make us more conscious of what we are, and of our own limitations, and give us more understanding of the world in which we now live. Their secondary value is, that by studying them, and in so doing attempting to put ourselves at their author's point of view, we may recover some of the criteria of judgment which have been disappearing from the criticism of poetry.[61]

The criteria which Eliot has been talking about have to do not with the poet's philosophy or subject matter but with the idea of a common style. He has emphasized time and again, however, that a common style can exist only where a community of belief prevails. Therefore, the first value he attributes to Johnson's criticism compels us, if we accept it, to do precisely what he has just finished advising us not to do: that is, to "elevate Johnson to a pinnacle, and lament the decline of civility which makes such criticism impossible." We are compelled to do so because the second value embodies a stipulation which is simply not viable. Eliot acknowledges in the extended quotation given above that the change in society between Johnson's day and our own has brought "inevitably a change in the consciousness of the literary critic himself," and he is not able to say exactly how the isolated modern critic is to simulate the consciousness of a critic who wrote, unselfconsciously, within and for a settled society. To be sure, he seems to advise something like a specific course of action

in his remarks on Johnson's penchant for making moral and stylistic judgments which are more or less inseparable. In doing so, however, he is forced to recognize that he is advocating an approach which is radically different from Johnson's; and, once again, the problem stems from his inability to make any meaningful distinction between the ideal of a common style and the ideal of cultural solidarity:

> If we were agreed upon the nature of the world we live in, on the place of man in it and on his destiny; if we were agreed as to what we meant by wisdom, by the good life for the individual and for society, we should apply moral judgments to poetry as confidently as did Johnson. But in an age in which no two writers need agree about anything, an age in which we must constantly admit that a poet with a view of life which we believe to be mistaken, may write much better poetry than another whose view is the same as our own, we are forced [to abstract artistic values from ideas]; and, in making [this abstraction], we are tempted to ignore, with unfortunate results, the moral value of poetry altogether. So that, of a poet's view of life, we incline to ask, not "is it true?" but "is it original?"[62]

Eliot's main point, in short, is that "Johnson was in a position, as no critic of equal stature has been since, to write purely literary criticism" precisely because he did not have to make any such abstraction.[63]

The foregoing discussion brings several interesting questions to mind. Assuming that the modern critic can make the abstraction recommended and arrive at what he considers a "just valuation of the artistic merit" of a given work of art, how can he be sure that his valuation will

be widely recognized as having importance comparable to (or indeed separable from) the view of life set forth in that work of art? Moreover, granted that his valuation is recognized as important, how can he be sure that it will subsume the conflicting points of view which are bound to arise on any question regarded as important in the modern world of letters? Obviously, he can have no such assurance and must recognize that, in making his valuation, he is speaking up as a partisan among bands of partisans, each of which holds its own point of view to be sacred and -- modern criticism being what it is -- each of which tends to go for the jugular of any contestant. In short, he must adopt precisely the argumentative stance which Eliot finds so distasteful.

Eliot's problem in this regard is, of course, strongly reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's central problem as a poet and a critic: the problem of being profoundly relevant to all segments of a disintegrating society without dealing with any of them on their own divisive and corrupting terms. More specifically, Eliot's suggestion that, through studying Johnson's criticism, we might recapture some of his criteria seems close to Arnold's theory of touchstones -- his idea that modern man might somehow learn to write poetry in the grand style by contriving stalagmites to match the stalactites depending from the past. Implicit in both approaches is the rather futile hope that a lost sense of community might be recovered through literary means. Both critics seem aware, however, that the species of

poetry and the species of criticism which they are respectively advocating arise naturally from a cultural solidarity already existing, and that the process cannot be reversed.[64] Once a critic becomes conscious of the fact that his assumptions about "the nature of the world we live in [and] the place of man in it and on his destiny" are not universally held, he becomes incapable of writing the sort of unselfconscious criticism which, in Eliot's opinion, Johnson wrote so admirably.

Indeed, as the result of Eliot's seeming inability to write this sort of unselfconscious criticism in the essay under consideration, Johnson emerges from his pages not as a useful example of a practicing critic but rather as a powerful symbol of lost cultural unity. It was remarked earlier on this score that Eliot must be regarded as having exerted a considerable influence on Johnson's twentieth century reputation. Generally speaking, his introduction of a radically new and, as it turned out, profoundly influential point of view in criticism obviously helped to clear the way for a general reappraisal of Johnson the critic. Moreover, the importance of his specific defense of Johnson during years when, as we have seen, Johnson's reputation as a critic was probably at its lowest ebb cannot be stressed too much. Yet we should not overlook the fact that his efforts to relate to his contemporaries the quality which he found most valuable in Johnson's criticism ended in paradox if not failure. For Eliot, that quality obviously inhered in the inextricable relationship between the critic and his cultural

milieu, and it could not be rekindled (except perhaps poetically), in an age in which such a relationship is seemingly impossible.[65] This question of Eliot's ability to bridge the gulf between the modern reader and Johnson in a strictly prosaic sense is the one which Mowat's essay raises but seems not to cope with. Certainly, it is a point which merits considerable attention.

In turning from T. S. Eliot to F. R. Leavis, we are faced with a similar if somewhat less dramatic case. While no one has advanced an extended argument for massive Johnsonian influence in the work of Leavis, Edward Emley has designated him in passing as a critic whose position derives "partly from Eliot, and partly from Johnson himself."[66] Leavis has shown signs that the classification may be apt, adopting the title of one book, The Common Pursuit, from Eliot's essays,[67] and the text (e. g. "not dogmatically but deliberately") of another, The Great Tradition, from Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare.[68] Beyond a doubt, he is, like Eliot, fascinated with the example which Johnson provides of a critic at work in a coherent culture.

It should be made clear at once, however, that Leavis is far more severe than Eliot in the matter of attributing serious limitations to the relationship which Johnson enjoyed with his milieu. Although he is intrigued by the concept of a culture in which a poet or critic could assume that "The ideas he wants to express are adequately provided for . . . in the common currency of terms, put together according to the conventions of grammar and logic," he explains that, in his opinion, such an assumption rendered

Johnson incapable of understanding language of a more profoundly meaningful nature which he encountered in Shakespeare, language which explores "further below the public surface than conventional expression takes cognizance of [and pushes] beyond the frontiers of the charted."[69] Indeed, Leavis endorses, albeit without attaching the customary onus to it, the venerable idea that Johnson's critical understanding had been limited to prose: "prose statement [is] the only use of language Johnson understands . . . he cannot appreciate the life-principle of drama as we have it in the poetic-creative use of language -- the use by which the stuff of experience is presented to speak and act for itself."[70] Moreover, Leavis also seems to accept the idea of a progress in criticism, noting that, although Johnson had seen through the folly of the unities, he had still been unable to arrive at any insight into dramatic theory comparable to Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief": "The subtlety of analysis that Coleridge, with his psychological inwardness, is to bring into criticism is not at Johnson's command. But it can be said that Johnson, with his rational vigor and the directness of his appeal to experience, represents the best that criticism can do before Coleridge."[71]

On the other hand, however, Leavis insists that Johnson "is a classic qua critic [whose criticism] is alive and life-giving," and he leaves no doubt in our minds that the life-giving qualities of that criticism have their roots in the "positive" literary tradition, unparalleled in any other period

of English history, in which Johnson lived and wrote.[72] Hence his remarks on Johnson's unselfconscious approach to literature seem close in substance to Eliot's contention that, because he had not felt the need to question the foundations of his tradition, Johnson had been free to practice a criticism which was purely literary:

> To be trained in so positive a tradition is to have formed strong anticipations as to the kind of discrimination one will have to make, and within the field to which the anticipations are relevant they favor quickness of perception and sureness of judgment. (An analogy: the "native" tracker owes his skill not to a natural endowment of marvellously good sight, but to analogous anticipations: knowing the kind of thing to look for, he is quick to perceive, and being habituated to the significance of the various signs, he is quick to appraise and interpret.)[73]

Concerning Johnson's expertise as a tracker on his own ground, Leavis notes elsewhere that "I myself judge that Johnson discriminates with something approaching infallibility between what is strong and what is weak in the eighteenth century."[74]

Leavis does not, of course, lay stress comparable to that of Eliot on the necessity of recapturing Johnson's criteria. But he is plainly concerned with the problem of acquiring literary taste in our day, and, in another context, he explains why the modern critic is compelled to admit that Johnson enjoyed enviable advantages:

> [I]t is not merely the amount [of modern literature] that is the trouble; there is the heterogeneity. The

> acquiring of taste is probably more difficult to-day than it ever was before. Consider for contrast the eighteenth century. Not only were there far fewer books to read, fewer topics and fewer distractions; the century enjoyed the advantages of a homogeneous -- a real -- culture. So Johnson could defer to the ultimate authority of the Common Reader. For the Common Reader represented, not the great heart of the people, but the competent, the cultivated, in general; and these represented the cultural tradition and the standards of taste it informed.[75]

Thus, although Leavis' discussion of Johnson's cultural tradition and the standards of taste it informed does not betray the homing instinct which so clearly marks Eliot's pages, some comparable feeling is nevertheless there in sufficient strength to support Edward Emley's belief that Leavis would like to do for modern literature what Johnson, in Emley's opinion, had done for the literature of the eighteenth century: "impose a unity and establish an order."[76] As we have just seen, however, the major point which Eliot and Leavis set out to make is that Johnson was not confronted with the problem of imposing a unity and establishing an order in the literature of his age. Indeed, they insist from first to last that he was able to write the kind of criticism he wrote precisely because he was reared up in an existing literary tradition of unparalleled unity and order. Consequently, Emley's conclusion that, as of 1951, Johnson's modern influence was restricted primarily to Eliot and Leavis, while true enough in one sense, surely fails to give sufficient emphasis to the quixotic nature of that influence:

> The critics interested in literature as a reflection or outgrowth of culture and tradition, such

> men as Eliot and Leavis, give evidence of having read Johnson carefully and sympathetically, and if [my italics] they could forget their awareness of the chaos of their own age, and focus upon something they could call a common culture, they would, I believe, be content to do for their time what Johnson did for his: interpret their age to itself and to succeeding generations. To critics of this type, Johnson is more important as a guide and serves as a better example of what they would do than even so great a critic as Coleridge.[77]

Needless to say, Emley touches lightly on an "if" of staggering implications. It is almost certainly because they are so acutely aware of the chaos of their own age and of modern man's urgent need for something resembling a common culture that Eliot and Leavis (the latter to a lesser extent, perhaps) write about Johnson the critic in a manner which often seems downright poignant.

Edmund Wilson is the last critic whom we shall consider under the heading of those who regard literature as a reflection of culture and tradition. Wilson has not written extensively on Johnson nor, in what he has written, paid much attention to the relation of Johnson's criticism to its cultural milieu. His remarks clearly belong in the same context with those of Eliot and Leavis, however, for, like them, Wilson inclines to the Olympian prospect rather than the rigid philosophical system in criticism, and, also like them, he issues judgments of a weighty and reflective nature which few seem able to ignore. His comments on Johnson appear in a review of Krutch's Samuel Johnson which he wrote for the New Yorker in 1944. In this review,

Wilson not only reveals some of his own ideas about the function of criticism but at the same time devotes a good bit of attention to what he considers the exasperating tendency of academic writers to "undermine their subjects or explain them away."[78] Although offering high praise for Krutch's biography, he does not absolve him entirely from this academic taint and notes that he had displayed in an earlier, pre-professorial work, The Modern Temper, "a much more definite point of view as a critic of literature in relation to life and of life in relation to history."[79] But in the midst of his lecture, Wilson does give Johnson's criticism this passing boost:

> The romantics and their successors have created, by exaggerating Johnson's limitations, an unfair prejudice against him as a critic. Actually, the Lives of the Poets and the preface and commentary on Shakespeare are among the most brilliant and the most acute documents in the whole range of English criticism, and the products of a mind which, so far from being parochially local and hopelessly cramped by the taste of its age, saw literature in a long perspective and could respond to the humanity of Shakespeare as well as to the wit of Pope.[80]

In summing up our discussion in this section, we should note that the support of Eliot, Leavis, and Wilson obviously exerted considerable influence in launching the current revival of Johnson's criticism. It was remarked earlier in this connection that Krutch's Samuel Johnson seems to mark the starting point of this most recent revival. Surely the notion that it does constitute such a landmark is supported by the fact that Wilson's comments, as well as some of those of Leavis, were first published in favorable reviews

of Krutch's book. In any event, the appearance at about the same time of Krutch's biography, Eliot's later essay, and the essays of Leavis and Wilson clearly pin-points the mid nineteen-forties as a major turning point in Johnson's modern fortunes. It should be stressed again, however, that the quality which Eliot and Leavis celebrate in Johnson's criticism -- the critic's unselfconscious sense of involvement in a homogeneous culture -- is one which is apparently non-transferable to our time.

* * * *

In noting that T. S. Eliot helped to clear the way for fresh appraisals of Johnson's criticism by attacking Romantic stereotypes, we should have made it clear, perhaps, that some of the reappraisals which Eliot apparently precipitated cannot be said to have enhanced Johnson's standing. These adverse appraisals come, needless to say, in the wake of the famous essay on the metaphysical poets. It will be recalled that, in propounding his theory of a dissociation of sensibility, Eliot argues that the metaphysical style had not, as Johnson believed, been something outside the mainstream of English poetry but rather "something permanently valuable, which subsequently disappeared, but ought not to have disappeared."[81] Although he acknowledges that "Johnson has hit, perhaps by accident, on one of their peculiarities" in observing that the attempts of the metaphysicals were "always analytic," Eliot criticizes him for failing to recognize that they had "after the dissociation . . . put the material together again in a new unity."[82]

Eliot's essay is, of course, generally credited with giving an immense lift not only to the Donne revival but to the development of the critical school which seemed to take charge of the Donne revival in the late nineteen-thirties, the so-called New Criticism.

As everyone is aware, the New Critics -- most notably John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate -- seized upon the idea that the metaphysical poets put their material together again in a new unity and developed it into a dominant force -- perhaps the dominant force -- in modern American criticism.[83] The publication in 1939 of Cleanth Brooks' Modern Poetry and the Tradition, one of several manifestos of the New Criticism, gave a clear indication of how this dynamic new idea was to affect Johnson's standing as a critic. In his preface, Brooks takes note of the fact that "the prevailing conception of poetry is still defined for us by the achievement of the Romantics" and complains about a practice in literary history which we have discussed at some length here, the proclivity of nineteenth and early twentieth century historians to assume "the Romantic period [to be] the one, far-off, divine event toward which the whole course of English poetry moves."[84] Brooks then goes on to explain that "we are witnessing (or perhaps have just witnessed) a critical revolution of the order of the Romantic Revolt" which requires us to revise our most fundamental ideas on this score.[85] At the center of the new revolution is, of course, the idea of metaphor as something more than adornment. As Brooks explains it, metaphor

is precisely the concept which explains the "new unity" achieved by the metaphysical poets. In other words, metaphor is obviously not removable from a good poem: "The comparison is the poem in a structural sense."[86]

Such a revolution in critical theory plainly calls for the traditional battlegrounds to be redrawn, but it is clear from Brooks' discussion that they will not be redrawn in any way that is advantageous to Johnson. Whereas the majority of critics and scholars had, for over a century, pitted the English Romantics against all comers, Brooks calls for a new alignment of those who understand the functional nature of metaphor, the Metaphysicals and the Moderns, against those who do not, the Neoclassicists and the Romantics.[87] The upshot for Johnson is obvious. He is to be placed in the same bag with his Romantic detractors and consigned with them to the literary morgue -- as before, outside the mainstream of criticism albeit in interesting new company.[88]

In view of their prominence in twentieth century letters, the opinions of Ransom, Brooks, and Tate are, of course, of great interest to us. Yet these critics are, as indicated, preoccupied with metaphysical poetry. This is not to say, however, that their interest has been confined to Donne and his school. Indeed, as Brooks himself explains, "If we are interested in getting at the core of metaphysical poetry, we should not be surprised if we find that we are dealing with something basic in all poetry, poetry being essentially one."[89] Nevertheless, although their aims are comprehensive,

their approach has been highly specialized, and as a result Brooks and his colleagues have tended to think of Johnson primarily in terms of the Life of Cowley, the one work in which he is, if not en rapport with the New Criticism, at least operating on its philosophical wave length. Accordingly, we shall return to these writers in the chapter which follows. Of proper concern for us now, however, are the two recent histories of criticism which are written from the New Critics' point of view: René Wellek's multi-volume A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, and a history which Brooks wrote in collaboration with William K. Wimsatt, Jr., Literary Criticism, A Short History.

To be sure, no attempt is made here to attach the label of New Critic to René Wellek or to suggest that he is a disciple of T. S. Eliot. Yet his ideas obviously undergird the position generally associated with Ransom, Brooks, and Tate, for, like them, Wellek seems convinced that no criticism can be valid which does not recognize the autonomy of the work of art. In his view, therefore, modern criticism begins with the efforts of the German Romantics to account for the discreteness of poetry:

> In a ... narrow sense we can speak of romantic criticism as the establishment of a dialectical and symbolistic view of poetry. It grows out of the organic analogy, developed by Herder and Goethe, but proceeds beyond it to a view of poetry as a union of opposites, a system of symbols. In Germany this view was in constant danger of becoming mystical and thus of losing its grip on the aesthetic fact itself, but in the Schlegels and a few critics around them a satisfy-

> ing theory of poetry was developed which guarded its fences against emotionalism, naturalism, and mysticism and successfully combined symbolism with a profound grasp of literary history. This view seems to me valuable and substantially true even today. We find it at that time, outside of Germany, only in two prominent critics: Coleridge and Hugo.[90]

As will readily be anticipated, the historian who thus emphasizes the philosophical basis of criticism is not likely to find much that will please him in Johnson's more or less pragmatic approach to literature. Indeed, believing as he does that sound critical ideas turn up in England only after Johnson's departure from the scene, Wellek cannot even grant him a transitional role in a meaningful continuum. Instead, he describes Johnson as a wanderer between two worlds, one who was incapable of relating to either:

> Dr. Johnson is, of course, no romanticist or even unconscious forerunner of romanticism: he is rather one of the first great critics who has almost ceased to understand the nature of art, and who, in central passages, treats art as life. He has lost faith in art as the classicists understood it and has not found the romantic faith. He paves the way for a view which makes art really superfluous, a mere vehicle for the communication of moral or psychological truth. Art is no longer judged as art but as a piece or slice of life.[91]

Wellek sees three major strains in Johnson's criticism, strains which (inevitably, in his opinion) were often in conflict with one another: these are realism, didacticism, and what Wellek calls abstractionism, an insistence on "general and transcendental truths" and a "condemnation of the particular,

the local and transient, a thesis which [Johnson] formulated possibly more sharply than any other critic of high repute."[92] As might be expected, the major conflict is seen to inhere in Johnson's desire to see human experience represented realistically and, at the same time, to see conventional morality fostered through precept or example. In this connection, Wellek considers Johnson's demand for poetic justice, particularly in Lear, Othello, and Measure for Measure, to have been "obtusely literal minded."[93] Moreover, he believes that Johnson's insistence on truth rather than fiction led him into even greater errors of judgment on Lycidas and Eloisa and Abelard. Concerning Johnson's charge that Lycidas was devoid of sincere grief, Wellek notes that

> Johnson does not realize that the requirement of sincere grief in the poet himself, though justifiable by Horatian or even Aristotelian precepts, does away with three quarters of the world's literature and introduces the standard of the individual experience of the author, which is both indeterminable and aesthetically false.[94]

On the other hand, Wellek disqualifies Johnson's estimate of Eloisa and Abelard as "one of the most happy productions of human wit" on the grounds that, contrary to what Johnson believed, the story had its roots not in fact but in "a highly sentimentalized and fictionalized version of the letters by Bussy de Rabutin [which is] at several removes from historical truth."[95]

Wellek also identifies a conflict between Johnson's penchant for the

abstract and his "actual practical love of life, of its concrete particularity."[96] Nevertheless, although he obviously sees little merit in abstract neoclassicism, Wellek cites it as a salubrious influence on Johnson owing to the fact that it gave him what slight purchase he had on the idea of art as a realm unto itself:

> The abstract neoclassicism clashes with the new realism; but the former, while deplorable in its desiccated abstractness, did something for Johnson: it gave him a hold on art, some view of the nature and function of art which would not simply identify it with a slice of life, selected and judged by moral standards.[97]

Wellek also finds in the discussion of the unities an indication that Johnson was not totally blind to the nature of art and observes that "In these arguments Johnson correctly grasps what modern aestheticians would call 'aesthetic distance.'"[98] Moreover, he notes with approval that "Johnson was not only touched but deeply involved in the general awakening of the historical sense and specifically in the revived interest in early English literature and in literary antiquarianism and historiography."[99] Finally, he is willing to concede what no one has ever really denied -- that Johnson was competent in his own backyard:

> Dr. Johnson's criticism . . . is not defeated by the conflicting theories of realism, moralism, and what is here called abstractionism. The three strands were no doubt reconcilable in his own mind. . . . The three motifs . . . are kept in balance and stressed according to context, alternating by turns, apparently without a clear consciousness that these criteria lead to

> very different conclusions about the nature of art and the value of particular works of art. Johnson wrote valuable analyses of many critical questions from one or several of these points of view and enjoyed a positive appreciation of a whole body of literature accessible to him within the limits of his taste.[100]

In the end, however, "Johnson's incomprehension of the centrally metaphorical character of poetry"[101] is a deficiency which cannot be mitigated, and, although Wellek does not display any particular animosity toward his subject, his judgment of him adheres so strictly to the letter of the law as he sees it that one reviewer, Harold S. Wilson, characterizes his discussion as "an argument for the prosecution."[102] Another reviewer, Northrop Frye, finds the severity of Wellek's chapter on Johnson somewhat more congenial. Since Frye stands at the helm of the most fashionable critical movement to spring up in recent years, the so-called myth-and-symbol school, his remarks obviously carry some weight. He uses the occasion of his review of Wellek's history to denigrate not only Johnson but also anyone claiming to find merit in Johnson's criticism:

> The account of Samuel Johnson brings out admirably his curious distrust of the creative power itself, which makes it obvious that most of the people who chortle about old Sam's sturdy common sense are really looking for some kind of rationalized Philistinism.[103]

Wimsatt and Brooks dedicate their Literary Criticism, A Short History to René Wellek and approach their subject from a point of view which the

honoree could scarcely find objectionable. They start out with two notions firmly in mind: first, that there is a "continuity and intelligibility in the history of literary argument," and, second, "that a history of literary ideas can scarcely escape being written from a point of view."[104] For the authors, the continuity in the history of literary debate is grounded in the preoccupation of all critics in all ages with the same fundamental questions:

> What does a poem say that is worth listening to? What does criticism say? The entire course of literary theory and criticism, from the time of Plato to the present, has in effect been occupied with producing more or less acute versions of those questions and more or less accurate and telling answers.[105]

For Wimsatt and Brooks as for Wellek, however, the only really satisfactory answer to these questions is to be found in the idea of art as entity. They are scarcely equivocal on this score:

> [O]ur final view, implicit in our whole narrative and in whatever moments of argument we may have allowed ourselves, has been that "form" in fact embraces and penetrates "message" in a way that constitutes a deeper and more substantial meaning than either abstract message or separable ornament . . . the poetic dimention is just that dramatically unified meaning which is coterminous with form.[106]

Since the authors believe that this ultimate concept emerges in England through a fusing of British empiricism and German metaphysics in the person of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, there can be from their point of view no room at the inn for Samuel Johnson.[107]

Indeed, Johnson is introduced rather ominously in their history as a major factor in "the last enfeebled exaggeration" of the Neoclassical idea of the universal,[108] an idea which, we are subsequently told, is unable in any of its several senses to "completely explain or justify the neoclassic theory [or give] a sufficient account of poetry."[109] But the substantial responsibility for the chapter on Johnson is that of Wimsatt, who, as everyone is aware, is a distinguished Johnson scholar as well as a distinguished critic.[110] His affection for his subject is evident, and perhaps as a consequence he is not able in Johnson's case to hew so closely to the theoretical line as Wellek had done. As we have seen, comments on Johnson's criticism have been characterized for over a century by what might be called conflicts of head and heart, and Wimsatt's discussion of Johnson suggests that even New Haven is unable to provide an absolute sanctuary from such difficulties. The following disclaimer might be cited as a lapse in terms of the authors' rather doctrinaire approach, albeit a very human and engaging one:

> As for Samuel Johnson, he is the Great Cham of 18th-century English literary criticism, a mammoth personality who was more capacious than any abstract dimension of critical theory. We surround him here with the atmosphere of the classic universal because his championship of that view is a late climax in its history and appears to be his distinctive contribution to 18th-century criticism. As a late classical giant, however, he is even more interesting for the complexity and sometimes inconsistent detail of his views. Near the close of our discussion of neo-classicism,

> it will be appropriate to dwell for a few pages on this curiously rounded, or squared-out, figure.[111]

But if Wimsatt loves the offender, he yet detests the offense. Identifying Johnson as a critic who "participated heavily in the rationalistic and psychological trends" of his century, Wimsatt equates the value of his "constant appeals from literary convention to a general knowledge of life and literature" with that of his "amateur empiricism" in chemistry and physiology.[112] Moreover, like Wellek, he recognizes Johnson as a liberalizing influence; but since Johnson's liberal impulses do not lead toward the light, he is seen as a terminal rather than a transitional figure:

> Johnson was not at heart a critic according to the neoclassic species. He never wrote anything approximating Addison's series of Spectators apprising Paradise Lost according to the categories laid down by neo-Aristotelianism. His notorious disgust at Lycidas was part of a preromantic preference for nature over the formal species and the conventions of the pastoral. In his Shakespeare Preface he not only defended the "mingled" genre of tragicomedy, but . . . gave memorably vigorous expression to that rejection of the unities of time and place (as no true illusions) which had been underway in English criticism since . . . Dryden's day.[113]

If Johnson's appeal from criticism to nature is recognized as a liberalizing impulse, however, it is also recognized as a problem owing to his tendency, as in Ramblers 52, 125, 156, and 158, to leave the question of precisely what is true to nature to the "pleasures of the voting audience,"[114] which practice Wimsatt condemns elsewhere as "The Affective Fallacy."[115]

In addition, it is to be anticipated that Wimsatt will deplore "the degraded condition of metaphor, and the general ornamentalism of stylistic theory" as these eighteenth century phenomena are reflected in Johnson's critical thought. He acknowledges that "A certain myopic literalism was undoubtedly one of the limitations of [Johnson's] critical theory and practice" and goes so far as to maintain that Johnson's "stubborn lack of interest in presentational analogy" had prevented him from recognizing the difference between a slow hexameter and a fast hexameter in even so congenial a poet as Pope.[116]

But the one great overriding objection to Johnson's criticism, for Wimsatt as for Wellek, is the lack of the philosophical machinery requisite for an understanding of the autonomous nature of art, a lack which, in their opinion, rendered Johnson and his Neoclassical predecessors incapable of unraveling the complex relation of art to life:

> Art, in the classic tradition, professed to render reality through a trick of presenting something either better or more significant than reality. But the trick obviously and quite often involved the unreal. Four antitheses: realism vs. fantasy, history vs. fiction, particular vs. universal, real vs. ideal, were subsumed in a medley of ways by the classic tradition under the basic antithesis nature vs. art. We have noticed how some of these antitheses clustered in the critical thinking of Samuel Johnson. And in our enumeration of senses for the term "general" we have suggested some of the logical dangers inherent in the whole situation.[117]

In terms of its effect on his reputation as a critic, it is evident that

the approach of Wellek, Wimsatt, and Brooks is, if anything, even less advantageous to Johnson than that of the majority of late nineteenth and early twentieth century commentators. As we have seen, these earlier writers disqualified Johnson on the grounds of his lack of sympathy for the concept of the transcendental imagination; Wellek, Wimsatt, and Brooks disqualify him for his lack of sympathy for "the principle of imaginative coalescence." But whereas writers from Saintsbury to Atkins had seen Johnson as a critic who was involved, one way or the other, in a meaningful continuum, the writers we have just considered represent him as the terminus of a dead tradition who was not involved in or even aware of the first stirrings of the critical method which they hold to be supreme.

In any event, the point of view represented in A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950 and Literary Criticism, A Short History is an extremely influential one. This being the case, we probably should not speak of a modern revival of Johnson's criticism without mentioning in the same breath that, in the histories of criticism which they have written, the important modern critics we have touched on here have no use for Johnson qua critic, except possibly as an analogue to the horrible example which the late Billy Sunday occasionally stationed on the platform beside him.

* * * *

Influential as they have been, however, the New Critics have not lacked vigorous opposition, and it may be recalled that some of their

contestants have found Samuel Johnson to be a sturdy stick with which to beat them. Yvor Winters, himself no negligible figure in contemporary criticism, provides a good case in point. When the old Southern Review and the Kenyon Review, at the time something close to the house organs of the New Criticism, issued in 1940 a manifesto calling for the English departments of the nation to cease and desist the teaching of history and begin the teaching of criticism, Winters responded with the observation that "a critical understanding is frequently quite impossible unless one knows a good deal of history" and went on to explain that the plan was impractical in any event owing to the paucity of competent critics:

> The number of people capable of doing valuable work in literary criticism in any period is very small. A great critic, indeed, is the rarest of all literary geniuses: perhaps the only critic in English who deserves the epithet is Samuel Johnson. And the number of persons required to teach English is remarkably large; further explanation seems unnecessary.[118]

In the late nineteen-forties, a less prominent but perhaps no less indignant writer, John Bard McNulty, also pointed to Johnson, a critic who "scorned finickiness for the bold stroke,"[119] as a helpful example to modern critics, who he believed were primarily engaged in explaining "to an addled public that all is not idiocy that babbles."[120] It will doubtless occur to most readers that McNulty's remarks have a curious relevance to those of Eliot and Leavis, for what he seems to deplore, without explaining or perhaps even realizing it, is the absence in our day of a positive tradition

within which critics might, like the native tracker described by Leavis, make swift and decisive judgments:

> [Johnson] gave to criticism things which it sadly lacks today -- positiveness, flavor, and principle. One of the troubles with literary criticism today is that it is sicklied over with the pale cast of too much microscopic thought. It is "iffish." It loves although . . . yet. It lacks Johnson's boldness in distinguishing black from white. . . . There is, for me, more intellectual stimulus in the prejudice of one sensible man than there is in the carefully framed conclusions of fifty literary measurers and weighers. I get bogged down -- we all get bogged down -- in the "iffing" and "perhapsing" of these androgynes.[121]

Several years later, James R. Sutherland took the occasion of his inaugural lecture at University College, London, to voice a more serious complaint. He expressed the opinion that modern criticism, particularly as practiced in America, had simply ceased to relate to literature in any meaningful way:

> More and more twentieth-century criticism does show signs of becoming an end in itself, self-sufficient and self-important; and more and more, it seems to me, it is being written by persons who do not greatly care about literature, but who are interested in making observations of one sort or another for which literature provides the necessary materials.[122]

More specifically, he expressed the concern that the new, method-oriented criticism was jeopardizing those qualities which had been essentially English in English criticism. In his view, English criticism

> is distinguished by urbanity and cheerfulness, and is not normally quarrelsome or controversial; it

> is not pedantic, but addressed to the common reader; it is well-informed rather than learned; open-minded rather than doctrinaire or authoritarian. The English critic has aimed at communicating the enjoyment which he has received from literature, and, perhaps, he has been more concerned with doing that than with passing judgment upon it. He has been interested in the man who wrote as well as in the writing, and in literature as it deals with life and reflects human personality.[123]

The four critics who best exemplify these qualities are, in Sutherland's opinion, Dryden, Johnson, Hazlitt, and Saintsbury. (He omits Coleridge, whom he regards as the greatest of all, on the grounds that he is not typical, and Arnold on the grounds that he "elevates [literature] to the status of religion.")[124]

Sutherland's remarks on Johnson are reminiscent of those of one of the critics whom he cites, George Saintsbury, and they make the point that criticism really has nothing much better to offer than the intuitive responses to literature of a man such as Johnson. He admits that Johnson "is not, of course, completely characteristic of anything but himself," and also that Johnson's disposition toward "establishing critical principles of universal validity" is not one which is shared in equal measure by the other three critics whom he names.[125] But he contends that "what is ultimately remarkable about Johnson as a critic is his independence and openness of mind, concealed though it may often be by the decisiveness of his judgments and the resounding finality of his prose style."[126] In his view, Johnson did

not measure literature against a priori standards but tended rather to "trust to his own reactions, and then to justify them; and this healthy practice has on the whole come fairly easily to English critics, who are not much given to allowing what they think they ought to feel to take precedence over what in fact they do feel."[127]

What is most English about Johnson's criticism, in Sutherland's view, is the interest he takes in the man who wrote the poetry he is criticizing, and Sutherland's remarks on this score reflect a point of view which is as far away from the New Criticism as, perhaps, it is possible to get:

> One of the major changes that have been taking place in twentieth-century criticism -- though again more noticeably in America than in this country -- is a tendency to discuss the poems rather than the poet, and the poem rather than the poems. The poem is being subjected to an analysis of ever-increasing complexity, but the fact that it is a poem by Pope or Wordsworth, and is therefore -- among other things, at least -- an expression of his mind, and not just a beautiful shell that the critic has picked up on the literary beach, is beginning to count less and less. In so far as this is a reaction from too much peripheral study of literature, an over-emphasis on biography, social and political background, and so forth, one can have a good deal of sympathy with the new concentration on the work of art itself. But, as Sidney said on another occasion, "shall the abuse of a thing make the right use odious?" For Johnson, at any rate, literature is always written by men and women, and a proper understanding of the author's mind and circumstances and character is for him part of the critic's business. . . . Johnson's life-and-letters approach to literature has remained character-

> istic of English criticism down to the present day, and it is an approach which is always likely to interest the average reader more than that of the detailed verbal and structural analysis which has now become fashionable.[128]

Sutherland's discussion gives us some reason to believe that the tradition of the urbane and scholarly connoisseur, as exemplified in the work of George Saintsbury, has not gone out altogether, at least on the far side of the Atlantic. The impression that it has not is supported by a review of Sutherland's lecture which appeared as a lead article in the Times Literary Supplement. The anonymous reviewer deplored the fact that modern criticism did indeed seem to be breaking away from the tradition described by Sutherland. Of the new approach which threatened to supplant it, he noted that "something new is offered, but it lacks the guarantee of authority for all its haughty tone."[129] Moreover, in remarks on Johnson, he laid particular stress on an idea which is anathema to the New Criticism: "Mr. Sutherland could have added that neither Johnson nor Dryden in their sinewy prose ever used what Montaigne called inkpot terms to express the conviction that literature is important because, and only because, it deals with life."[130]

Fortunately for Johnson's reputation, perhaps, his example as a critic has been found useful in ways other than simply as a counter to the alleged menace of the New Criticism. Important modern scholars and critics have dealt with Johnson in a somewhat more objective and compre-

hensive fashion, approaching his criticism from a point of view which is highly congenial with, if not directly influenced by, the "inside" approach advocated by R. S. Crane. One of the first and most prominent of these critics to speak up in Johnson's behalf was M. H. Abrams, who published an essay in 1942 defending Johnson against the long-standing charge that, because he had not been attuned to the music of Shakespeare and Milton, he must be counted out as a critic of poetry. In this essay, Abrams takes a tack similar to that pursued at about the same time by Eliot and Leavis, for he argues that no critic in any age can fail to be unconsciously restricted by his tradition in the matter of what he is able to respond to in poetry:

> Whatever a reader's innate sensibility, and however definite his critical principles, these attributes must finally engage with a poem through an intrincate set of expectations and habitual reactions, of which the reader himself may be largely unaware. For skills are simply advantageous habits. The difficulty is that habits which are advantageous for one kind of poetry may be ill adapted to poetry of a different order.[131]

Describing these unconscious habits as intellectual eye-glasses, Abrams goes on to argue that, if Johnson's spectacles focus with greater clarity on Dryden and Pope than on Shakespeare and Milton, he is not to be summarily disqualified, for no critic can possess spectacles which focus on all poets equally well:

> Johnson . . . was one of our greatest critics, and many later critics have proved no less limited in

> the range of their perception, without matching Johnson's virtues of particularity and acuteness of vision and candor in judgement. If Johnson read Milton and Donne through the spectacles of Pope, Wordsworth and Coleridge read Pope through the spectacles of Milton, while more recent critics have read Wordsworth and Coleridge and Milton through the spectacles of Donne.
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> . . . . . .
>
> What a critic sees in poetry is the result . . . of both his conscious principles and established responses. If Johnson . . . was not equally apt for all kinds of poetry, no more is any other reader. For there is no perfect critic, only more or less adequate critics. And a critic is adequate for his total task in proportion to the scope of his theory, the range of his experience in reading, and the degree to which his responses remain adaptive to unforeseeable literary possibilities.[132]

An equally flexible and even more appreciative estimate of Johnson's criticism is to be found in Abrams' The Mirror and the Lamp, a work which was first published in 1953, and which is now generally regarded as the definitive study of English Romantic criticism. Although his primary concern is, obviously, the English critics of the early nineteenth century, Abrams does not, like so many of his predecessors, represent their achievement as the ultimate criterion of critical practice. On the contrary, he states at the outset his conviction that

> A good critical theory . . . has its own kind of validity. The criterion is not the scientific verifiability of its single propositions, but the scope, precision, and coherence of the insights that it yields into the properties of single works of art and the adequacy with which it accounts for diverse kinds of art. Such a criterion will, of course,

> justify not one, but a number of valid theories, all in their several ways self-consistent, applicable, and relatively adequate to the range of aesthetic phenomena; but this diversity is not to be deplored. One lesson we gain from a survey of the history of criticism, in fact, is the great debt we owe to the variety of the criticism of the past . . . these theories have not been futile, but as working conceptions of the matter, end, and ordonnance of art, have been greatly effective in shaping the activities of creative artists.[133]

It scarcely needs mention that Abrams' approach to the criticism of the past differs radically from that of Atkins on the one hand and Wellek, Wimsatt, and Brooks on the other. Accordingly, while no attempt is made here to argue that any one of these takes precedence of the rest, it does seem incumbent on us to recognize that Abrams' approach is the only one of the three which does not automatically cancel Johnson out as a continuing influence. As was noted a few pages back, it is in essence the "inside" approach urged by R. S. Crane and the one followed by Jean Hagstrum and W. R. Keast in the important studies of Johnson's criticism which we shall look at a few pages further along. It should be pointed out, therefore, that, although Abrams' widely-respected study is scarcely concerned with Johnson's criticism in any primary or comprehensive way, The Mirror and the Lamp nevertheless has this significance for us: it is the only influential recent history of criticism which not only recognizes but insists on the legitimacy of a viewpoint which happens to be that of two of Johnson's strongest modern supporters. In addition, however, The Mirror and the

Lamp also embodies a specific estimate of Johnson's standing as a critic which, though necessarily brief, is perhaps as laudatory as any to be found in modern letters. Most readers will recall in this connection that, in his introductory chapter, Abrams sorts out the critical theories of the past and present under four general headings depending on the primary concern of each with the world, the audience, the artist, or the work of art itself. The focus of his work is, of course,the shift in emphasis from the audience to the artist at the end of the eighteenth century, or, to use his terminology, the shift from "pragmatic" to "expressive" poetic theories at that time. But he leaves no room for doubt that he holds as valid and important the critical orientation which the Romantics supplanted:

> The pragmatic orientation, ordering the aim of the artist and the character of the work to the nature, the needs, and the springs of pleasure in the audience, characterized by far the greatest part of criticism from the time of Horace through the eighteenth century. Measured either by its duration or the number of its adherents, therefore, the pragmatic view, broadly conceived, has been the principal aesthetic attitude of the Western world.[134]

Out of this vast and populous orientation, Abrams singles out Samuel Johnson as the outstanding exemplar of critical excellence:

> [T]o appreciate the power and illumination of which a refined and flexible pragmatic criticism is capable, we must turn from . . . abstract systematizers of current methods and maxims to such a practical critic as Samuel Johnson. Johnson's literary criticism assumes approximately the frame of critical

> reference I have described, but Johnson, who distrusts rigid and abstract theorizing, applies the method with a constant appeal to specific literary examples, deference to the opinions of other readers, but ultimately, reliance on his own expert responses to the text. As a result Johnson's comments on poets and poems have persistently afforded a jumping-off point for later critics whose frame of reference and particular judgments differ radically from his own.[135]

Unlike The Mirror and the Lamp, David Daiches' Critical Approaches to Literature is not a systematic history. Yet as the title suggests, it is a study which is concerned in more than a superficial way with the criticism of the past, and it is of interest to us because Daiches, like Abrams, numbers Johnson among the great critics who have made lasting contributions to the "varying ways in which the art of literature and works of literature can be profitably discussed."[136] What Daiches seems to admire most in Johnson is his refusal to lose touch with the realities of the workaday world:

> Every now and again [Johnson] turns from his more professional or technical critical activity to make a grand concession to the nature of things, to the facts about readers and writers, appealing "from criticism to nature," as he put it in another connection. Thus at the conclusion of his life of Gray, where he praises the "Elegy" after condemning most of Gray's other poems on grounds similar to those which led him to dismiss "Lycidas," he remarks: "In the character of his Elegy I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours." This is an observation that few great critics could or would have made -- one cannot imagine Ben Jonson or Coleridge or T. S.

> Eliot making it -- and represents a kind of healthy pragmatism which mitigated the strictness of his principles. "No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money," he once said, and there is a large recognition of the facts of life in Johnson's critical writing which prevents him from ever becoming priggish or from moving in an atmosphere too rarefied for non-professionals to breathe. It is that ability to accept the facts of life that distinguishes Johnson from other critics who, like him, have firmly ennunciated principles and a clear and logical method.[137]

The last history of criticism which we will consider in this study, and, indeed, the last one which has appeared, is George Watson's The Literary Critics, which was published as a Penguin in 1962. Watson's study represents something of an anomaly among the histories which we have been looking at in this chapter owing to his fundamental lack of confidence in critical theory as a commodity having either a meaningful past or a promising future. On this point, Watson rather vigorously disassociates himself from his predecessors:

> [A]ll previous histories -- Saintsbury and Atkins in their day, as much as Wellek and Wimsatt in ours -- have assumed that what we call literary criticism is, with some embarrassing exceptions, a single activity, and that its history is the story of successive critics offering different answers to the same questions. We may call this the Tidy School of critical history.[138]

Watson rejects the idea of a sustained organic growth of critical doctrine and claims to see instead "a record of chaos marked by sudden revolution [in which English critics] are not all engaged on work of a logically com-

parable kind."[139] Watson seems to be at one on this score with Abrams, who also notes that "many theories of art cannot readily be compared at all, because they lack a common ground on which to meet and clash."[140] But the resemblance is only superficial, for, unlike Abrams, who believes that all good critical theories have permanent value, Watson maintains that the theories of the past merely obstruct the study of the critics whom we generally associate with them:

> Johnson's Lives mark the end of an era -- an era that began with Dryden's essays of the 1660s, and which shared some common assumptions about the nature of poetry which are called neoclassical. But the more we talk about neoclassicism, the less interesting Dryden, Addison, Pope, Fielding, and Johnson will look. A common denominator of doctrine -- any doctrine -- is always likely to be uninteresting. It is, in any case, hardly more than a historian's tool: no European critic can be produced who believed in the whole of neoclassical doctrine as scholars now expound it. And, ultimately, it does not matter whether Dryden, or Johnson, believed in it or not: the critic's strategy in the field, like any good general's, is likely to vary with the needs of the moment, and the study of theory is more likely to reveal his characteristic manner of excuse and justification than to produce any other result of intrinsic interest. Criticism is incurably pragmatic: Dryden will write blank verse if it suits him to do so, and Addison's love of Paradise Lost, or Johnson's admiration of the Rape of the Lock, is instinctive rather than principled. And, of course -- overwhelming objection -- theory has no future. The elaborate psychological and physiological theories of the Augustan aestheticians concerning the nature of beauty have now only the melancholy interest of deserted ruins. They are not even worth contradicting, for the most part, and (for the most part) no

> one ever troubled to contradict them. An occasional law, like that of the unities of time and place, finds its refutation, but on the whole Augustan aesthetic debates are neither talked out nor talked down: they simply fail to generate debate at all. For the solid achievement of this first continuous century in the English critical tradition, we must surely look beyond theory altogether.[141]

The achievement which Watson alludes to is, in his opinion, a historical one amounting to the conservation of the English past, and it is an achievement in which Johnson, whom he designates as "the true father of historical criticism in English,"[142] is seen to have played the dominant role. It is not the achievement, however, but the method used to attain it which provides the continuity Watson finds in English criticism, and he contends that much of the confusion in previous histories of criticism stems from the modern practice of using the word "criticism" to designate "three kinds of discussion that have nothing in common except a reasoned concern for poetry."[143] Watson identifies these three kinds of discussion as legislative criticism (how to write poetry), theoretical criticism (what poetry is), and descriptive criticism (the analysis of existing texts), and designates the last as "the youngest of the three forms, by far the most voluminous, and the only one which today possesses any life and vigour of its own."[144] In Watson's view, this youngest branch of English criticism begins with Dryden but comes of age in Johnson:

> With Samuel Johnson . . . English criticism achieves greatness on a scale that any reader

> can instantly recognize. The Lives of the Poets stand four-square as the foundation-stone of our critical tradition, and they need no concessive defense of a "historical" kind: the Life of Pope, for instance, is still the best general account of Pope in existence. The task is not to justify or recommend -- Johnson's Lives need to be recommended about as much as the Odes of Keats -- but to defend Johnson from his own fan-club of devotees. For in spite of several notable calls-to-order, the Johnson of the Johnsonian's imagination still exerts more influence than the Johnson of the Rambler, or even of the Lives.[145]

Most American readers will be appalled to learn that Watson singles out W. R. Keast as a critic who has failed to commune properly with Johnson the writer. He takes exception to Keast's estimate, in the important essay which we shall be considering in a moment, that Johnson had been a liberalizing influence who had attempted "to subvert accepted critical dogmas and to deliver literature from the fetters of prescriptive criticism."[146] Watson argues to the contrary that Johnson was a critic whose description was imbued with a good bit of legislation, one who "certainly believed that the object of criticism was, in a very literal sense, to lay down the law, to ascertain and apply general principles of poetic excellence."[147] Indeed, he specifies at another point that Johnson's major distinction lies in the fact that, in his criticism, analysis of existing texts becomes inseparable from evaluation, with the result that "recommendation and condemnation are elevated into an inquiry of principle."[148] Watson also attacks what he considers the widespread misconception that Johnson had been a "close

reader" in the modern sense. Although he contends that Johnson got closer to the text than any other eighteenth century critic, he makes it clear that, in his opinion, "Johnson would not shine in a modern practical-criticism class. His mind does not settle: it darts. In his passion for knowledge, including remote and useless knowledge, he is more of a Saintsbury than an Empson."[149] Yet, if a man who lacked the patience to read books through could not aspire to the virtues of a close rhetorical analyst, his approach did suggest "virtues of quite another kind: momentary but brilliant insights, a gift for perceiving relationships, certainty of judgement, breadth. And these are precisely the virtues of Johnson's criticism."[150] Watson is, of course, aware that Johnson had weaknesses to match his strength, most notably a congenital laziness and "a very general lack of intimacy with the creative act."[151] As a result of his remoteness from the creative act, perhaps, Johnson is credited with bringing a dignity to criticism which had been unknown previously. Watson designates him as "the first English critic who writes as if he were the equal of the greatest of modern poets"; but he tempers this judgment with the observation that "dignity is no good substitute for sympathy."[152]

As might be anticipated, the theoretical basis of Johnson's critical practice gets short shrift in Watson's study. Such troublesome terms as Nature and Reason are explained in a twinkling: ". . . 'nature' means the practice of the ancient poets, and 'reason' the historical sense that enables the informed critic to interpret their practice in the light of existing conditions."[153] Watson cites Rambler 125

in this connection to prove that Johnson's ideas about Nature and Reason are scarcely relevant to his practice in any case. Once Johnson has admitted that every new genius forces a reappraisal of existing critical principles, Watson believes that he provides himself with an "escape-clause [which] admits exceptions vast enough to destroy any usefulness the original principle may have had."[154] In short, Johnson's critical theory is represented as nothing more "than an umbrella to shelter under in showery weather [which] allows Johnson to praise what he likes, and condemn what he does not like. But this, after all, is precisely what we demand of a critic, especially of a critic whose intuitions are as fine as Johnson's."[155]

In summary, then, we can say that the comments of the writers surveyed in this section sustain the rather non-controversial thesis that, since 1940, Johnson the critic has become once again a positive influence in the world of letters. As we have seen, Winters, McNulty, and Sutherland not only cite him as a timeless exemplar of critical excellence but hold him up as a healthful corrective to one of the most influential schools in modern criticism. In less partisan fashion, perhaps, Abrams and Daiches likewise number him among the great critics of the past who continue to be relevant. Finally, Watson makes a lively case for Johnson as the founder of what he considers the only vital tradition to be found in English criticism. Yet, if these comments support the idea of a Johnsonian revival, they also support the idea of a Johnsonian continuity, for these

writers do not, after all, claim to perceive merits in Johnson which had remained hitherto undiscovered. Instead, they approach Johnson from points of view -- some old, as in the case of Sutherland, some new, as in the case of Abrams and Watson -- which permit them to assert the primary qualities in his criticism which always had been deemed praiseworthy. John Bard McNulty, for example, may show an affinity with Eliot and Leavis, but it should also be noted that he lauds Johnson for exactly the quality which Macaulay had found valuable, albeit in a somewhat more grudging manner, over a hundred years before.[156] Similarly, Sutherland, Daiches, Abrams, and Watson endorse a judgment which is common to virtually all of Johnson's defenders from Sir Edgerton Brydges to F. R. Leavis: the idea that Johnson's confident and conditioned response to literature has produced criticism which, though perhaps limited in some areas, is so excellent at its best that "no one can break it, compete with it, or diminish its value."[157] Indeed, we find in most of these writers an echo of Arnold's notion of Johnsonian points de repère, fixed points of critical certainty which we can fall back on in periods of confusion. Under this same heading, we note in Abrams an interesting corollary which we shall return to in the following chapter: the idea that Johnson has provided subsequent critics with a Gibraltar-like solidity to shove off from in pursuit of new critical objectives.

* * * *

In the years following 1940, when the literary Establishment rapidly came to be characterized by a passion for involved critical theory, it was to be anticipated that, for some, one major obstacle to a Johnson revival would be his apparent lack of a clearly defined system. To be sure, not everyone has considered a systematic theory to be de rigueur. We have just finished looking at one recent commentator who has nothing but contempt for critical theory, as well as a number of earlier and more prominent twentieth century critics who did not appear to be noticeably oppressed by Johnson's apparent dearth of a system. In addition, the dean of American Johnson scholars, the late Chauncey Brewster Tinker, has argued that Johnson is a great critic precisely because he did not bog down in theory:

> Johnson's criticism is not a system, every detail of which must be consistent with certain principles from which all casual expressions are supposed to derive. His words, in truth, have a dogmatic air. He asserts his opinions magisterially. But, though we still read through the Lives of the Poets, we do not do so to find out what to think about Milton and Pope, but rather to enjoy the humor and the humors, the audacities and the prejudices of a man of genius, who even in his aberrations is always amusing and stimulating. These, the true Johnsonian has always felt, are more valuable than any system.[158]

Nevertheless, in a literary milieu which has been characterized by the closely reasoned efforts of academic critics to explain the work of art as a determinate thing, having an existence apart from the mind of the

reader and that of the writer, or, more recently, by equally involved efforts to relate the work of art to the archetypes alleged to inhere in the universal unconscious, the critical pronouncements of Samuel Johnson, even as tidied up by Joseph Epes Brown, have the appearance of a ramshackle and generally disorganized approach to literature. As late as 1962, we find M. J. C. Hodgart expounding what might be called a prevailing twentieth century attitude in his popular study, Samuel Johnson and his Times:

> The greatest literary criticism, like that of Aristotle and Coleridge, is signalized by its power to produce theories; theories which cannot offer the degree of verifiability required of the mathematical sciences, but which are analogous to those of history and the social sciences. By raising the discussion to a high enough level of abstraction, criticism can hope to show what are the basic qualities of good literature.[159]

Thus, although he concedes that Johnson on the basis of his skills in observation and description, his learning, and his almost unfailing good judgment, "was by far the greatest critic of his century and has rarely been surpassed since," Hodgart cannot allow him a place in the front rank owing to his lack of system.[160]

Hodgart might be criticized on this score for failing to take note of the efforts of Jean Hagstrum, W. R. Keast, and Walter Jackson Bate to demonstrate to a theory-oriented age that Samuel Johnson's criticism has its roots in a system which is as coherent, as valid, and possibly as com-

plex as those of his more determined modern detractors. Generally speaking, the first two scholars named follow the approach advocated by R. S. Crane, an approach which, as Crane himself explains, is capable of discovering theory which is not visible to the naked eye:

> Theory . . . is inescapable, but it may of course be present in any critical writing, not as explicit and argued assertion, but merely as a complex of unstated assumptions and habits of procedure. There have been great critics of both kinds: there is Johnson, for instance, whose critical system must be inferred in large part from the remarkably systematic operations of his mind on particular literary questions; and there is, at the other extreme, Coleridge, for whom the long philosophical preliminaries of the Biographia Literaria were an indispensable means to saying cogently what he wanted to say about poetic diction and the poetry of Wordsworth. Tastes will differ, but I cannot think of any objective criterion that will justify us in saying that the practical criticism of either one of these two very different writers is intrinsically better than that of the other.[161]

The connection between Keast and Crane is, of course, well known: Keast's essay, "The Theoretical Foundations of Johnson's Literary Criticism," first appeared in Critics and Criticism, edited by Crane and generally considered the magnum opus of the critical school which Kenneth Burke has characterized as the "Chicago Neo-Aristotelians." Although Jean Hagstrum probably cannot be categorized as a Chicago Neo-Aristotelian, his Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism, which was originally published in 1952, the same year as the first edition of Critics and Criticism, re-

flects a point of view which is highly congenial with the ideas of Crane outlined in this study and those set forth in Keast's essay. In any event, these two studies can be read as independent but very similar counter-manifestos against the New Criticism, for the primary aim of both is to demonstrate the soundness of critical practices which the New Critics explicitly condemn. It is scarcely necessary to point out, of course, that, in contrasting the views of Hagstrum and Keast with those of Wellek, Wimsatt, and Brooks, we are coming to grips with the major issue in the question of Johnson's current usefulness as a critic. At the center of the dispute is the question of what Johnson had in mind when he called for an appeal from criticism to nature. As we have seen, Wimsatt identifies Johnson's conception of general nature as "the last enfeebled exaggeration" of a Neo-Platonic notion of species, and deals with it thereafter as a critical idea having no modern application. Keast, on the other hand, believes that "for Johnson, nature is not an ontological, but a psychological concept,"[162] and contends, moreover, that it is a concept which continues to be viable. Although there appears to be some disagreement between Hagstrum and Keast concerning precisely what the term "nature" embraces, both writers are clearly convinced that the psychological link between the poet and his audience provides a stable point of reference for the literary critic. In short, then, they insist on the validity of critical criteria to be found outside of the fence which the New Critics have errected around the finished

work of art.

Hagstrum reveals his close affinity with the ideas of Crane in the preface of the new edition of his book published in 1967:

> I republish Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism convinced that its topical approach remains an important means of mastering the diverse, practical, often occasional, but always principled thought of one of the greatest English critics. The hard bones of what Johnson called "naked criticism" -- but also of his minor and passing judgments -- become apparent only if one sees clearly the structure of the great topics: nature, pleasure, wit, and the other subjects of my chapters.[163]

In his earlier preface, he explains that, in order to depict these great topics clearly, it will be necessary for him to avoid some of the terms which had led so many of his predecessors to cram Johnson into arbitrary and often uncongenial categories:

> . . . to attempt to determine the ingredients in the Johnsonian mixture of the classical and the romantic is, it seems to me, an impossible task, chiefly because the terms have not been and perhaps can never be satisfactorily defined. . . . For the same reasons, attempts to affirm or deny that Johnson was predominantly a humanist, an authoritarian, a traditionalist, a skeptic are necessarily obfuscating. The terms used are either too vague or too intimately a part of our own intellectual battles. Johnson was all of these or none depending on the particular meanings attached to these indeterminate expressions. I have therefore attempted to confine myself to the language of exposition and to avoid the language of persuasion.[164]

Nevertheless, although he pointedly shies away from attributing

Johnson's thought to any "direct or exclusive philosophical influence," Hagstrum identifies him as a man whose "conception of the mind as necessarily anchored in experience is reminiscent of the main emphasis in Locke's epistemology."[165] To establish the difference between a criticism oriented toward Locke and the various critical orientations which have prevailed since, Hagstrum finds it convenient to draw a comparison between the basic assumptions of Johnson and Coleridge concerning the powers of the human mind. To label one rational and the other imaginative is, in Hagstrum's view, to make a relatively meaningless distinction:

> [F]or Johnson all mental action, whether rational or imaginative, is always secondary to the direct experience of reality and is, apart from experience, seriously suspect; for Coleridge all mental action, whether rational or imaginative, is primary; it does not depend upon experience but constitutes experience.
>
> The results for literary criticism should be obvious. For Johnson experienced reality can be an objective test of art because the mind -- even though it may combine, divide, and order that reality -- never gets very far away from it. But for Coleridge objective reality can never be a satisfactory test of art, for the mind destroys it and then creates it in new fusions; the only valid tests are either the organic principles within the work itself or the type of mental operation that was concerned in creating it.[166]

Needless to say, the intent of Hagstrum's study, one that is operative throughout, is to demonstrate that Johnson's critical terms are more or less interchangeable. He does not equivocate on this score: "To most eighteenth-century thinkers judgment, understanding, and reason were

virtually synonymous, as were fancy and imagination -- all of them faculties which, in a sane mind at least, could never be free of antecedent experience."[167] For Hagstrum most of Johnson's key terms are, therefore, subsumed into a conception of experience as a comprehensive and ultimate reality, a reality which is at once the source, and end, and test of art:

> [T]he truest view of [Johnson's] criticism is that which looks upon it as experience moving gradually toward principle, and what is presented as experience can be tested only by experience, by more experience, and by still more experience. The highest praise of his critical endeavors is that they are empirically lively in themselves and the cause of that empirical liveliness that is in others.[168]

Thus Hagstrum endorses Johnson's conception of the work of art as a means of communication, and, in so doing, drops the gauntlet in the arena of modern criticism. Once again he is scarcely equivocal:

> A poem seemed to [Johnson] to possess no independent, autonomous existence. . . . It was for Johnson a moral and psychological instrument of communication that pointed outside itself to the empirical reality which it "imitated," to the mind that had created it, or to the mind that was to enjoy it and be instructed by it. It is perhaps for this reason . . . that most of Johnson's definitions of poetry are couched in the language of psychology, of education, and of communication.[169]

In Hagstrum's view, Johnson could not have found a language more fortuitous than that of psychology, for in choosing it, he laid "a foundation for psychological criticism in the unchanging order of nature and [provided] for criticism

materials that are almost as amenable to investigation as the natural laws of physical science."[170]

Most readers will be aware that Hagstrum is now generally credited with having demonstrated, once and for all, that Johnson's critical pronouncements are not only consistent with one another but firmly rooted in a coherent and viable critical system. Bernhard Fabian has recently lauded this accomplishment and recognized that it is one which has implications far beyond the confines of Johnson scholarship:

> Mit anderen Worten, es geht Hagstrum darum, Johnsons Literaturkritik im durchgehenden Zusammenhang einer systematischen Exposition zu zeigen. Damit können wesentliche Aspekte das Gegenstandes sichtbar gemacht werden. Ein entscheidender Vorteil des Darstellungsweise liegt darin, das sie zu einer Zeit, da der autonome Charakter des Kunstwerkes leicht überbetont werden kann, die Gegenposition in voller Klarheit herausstellt und damit bestimmte Grenzen der heutigen Literaturkritik freilegt. Der Unterschied zwischen Johnson und der Moderne is offenbar, aber vielleicht kann gerade dadurch sein Theorie und Praxis zu einem "part of our usable critical past" werden. Zumindest ist man . . . darüber klar, dass Johnsons Literaturkritik wie die der Heutigen eine esoterische Angelegenheit ist.[171]

As was suggested a few pages back, W. R. Keast does not attempt an all-inclusive discussion of Johnson's criticism. Instead, he concentrates on the implications of Johnson's reliance on the audience as the ultimate point of reference in criticism. Keast tells us that, as soon as we recognize his faith in the response of the audience,

> we see at once why Johnson's criticism is predominantly practical and why he developed no "art" of poetry nor engaged much in the literary theorizing so common in his day. His distrust of "inactive speculation" here co-operates with his conception of literature: an elaborated theory would necessarily involve, in Johnson's terms, an analysis or prescription of the possible or proper in art. But such an analysis or prescription must be arbitrary, for although the general conditions of pleasing may be specified, the aspects of nature and the traits of works which may conduce to this end cannot, since nature offers boundless possibilities to the poet and since there is no discoverable limit to human powers.[172]

Nevertheless, if the critic cannot aspire to know ultimate and fixed truths about the nature of art, he can depend on the fact that

> Men are in essential respects everywhere the same. Experience tells us that the general conditions of pleasure are simple and fixed: all men take pleasure in the recognition of truth -- the consonance of what is done or said to "the general sense or experience of mankind" -- and in the surprise of novelty or variety.[173]

Hence Johnson's reliance on continuance of esteem as a major proof of excellence in poetry -- what has pleased many and pleased long must perforce have struck a basic chord in human nature, in which "the general conditions of pleasure are simple and fixed."

In substance, then, Keast, like Hagstrum, goes against the grain of a powerful point of view in modern criticism by dealing with the work of art as a means of communication rather than as an inviolable entity. Moreover, as noted above, he not only designates Johnson's conception of nature as a

psychological rather than an ontological concept but contends that Johnson's ideas on the general and the particular are universally valid:

> Nature is the link between author and reader -- the common elements that guarantee truth and the accidental variations that produce variety being the basis for selection by the one and for comparison and judgment by the other. . . . [Nature] is defined, that is, not in terms of properties independent of the mind but in terms of its capacity to produce certain responses in men. General nature is thus what all men everywhere recognize as like themselves, and particular nature is what men in general recognize as present only at certain times, under certain conditions, or among certain men. Both truth and variety arise from the constant linkage between human passions and their effects: the regularity with which the same passions produce effects of the same kind permits recognition and hence truth; the infinite accidental modifications in the actual manner in which the passions do their uniform work afford novelty and variety.[174]

It should be stressed again, however, that, although their approaches to Johnson are essentially compatible, there is a rather pronounced difference of emphasis in the studies of Hagstrum and Keast. This difference is perhaps best explained in Hagstrum's own words. In a review of Keast's essay, he suggests that Keast has neglected one of the most important and troublesome aspects of Johnson's criticism:

> . . . the argument is open to this objection, that it leaves no room for what is one of the most prominent, although admittedly difficult, sides of Johnson: the moral and didactic. Nothing is here said of that ethical insight which, Johnson believed, should lead a writer "to distinguish those parts of nature which are most proper for imitation." . . . The failure to take account of this important aspect of Johnson's

> criticism seems to me to arise from a misconception of nature [as the psychological link between author and reader] . . . . This interpretation of general nature . . . seems to make the concept a much more subjective one than the evidence permits. . . . Nature to Johnson . . . meant reality (that is, things that really exist) and general moral and psychological law. In Johnson's belief that reality was, in the last analysis, morally constituted, one has the final source and sanction of that moral truth which he demanded in almost all kinds of literature.[175]

Like the studies of Hagstrum and Keast, Walter Jackson Bate's The Achievement of Samuel Johnson also argues that Johnson's criticism is to be validated in terms of its relation to human experience; Bate's approach is not only different, however, but clearly far more dramatic as well. It should be noted in passing that, in The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, Bate disavows an earlier interpretation of Johnson's criticism which he had advanced in his From Classic to Romantic. It will be recalled that, in this earlier study, Bate had accepted Imlac's dissertation on poetry in Chapter X of Rasselas as the key to Johnson's critical position, and, like W. K. Wimsatt, had identified that position with a venerable classical idea of species:

> [I]n general the classical conception of nature, from the Greeks to almost the middle of the eighteenth century, is that central idea and form which the particular struggles to attain; and when Aristotle defined poetry as an "imitation of nature," he did not mean the indiscriminate copying of any individual, but rather the selective imitation of what is general and representative in man.[176]

In The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, Bate takes note of this earlier dis-

cussion only "as an opportune means of disowning it," and refers his readers to Hagstrum for a corrective explanation grounding Johnson's ideas in "the English empirical tradition that follows Locke."[177]

In any case, Bate's intention in The Achievement of Samuel Johnson precludes his saying much about the origins of Johnson's critical ideas, for he deals with the criticism primarily as it relates to "that part of [Johnson's] writing which is concerned with human experience in the broadest sense."[178] On this score, Bate is at one with Thomas Tyers in the belief that "[Johnson] 'belonged' not to criticism or any other single field of learning but 'to the world at large.'"[179] Moreover, the conception of experience which is operative in Bate's later book does not derive from Locke but from Alfred North Whitehead, whom Bate salutes in his final explanation of the importance of literature to mankind and the importance of Johnson's criticism to literature:

> This indeed is the first premise and probably the final justification of the humanities: that the actual process of concrete example, in its particular and struggling context, takes precedence over abstractions. Accordingly it does not minimize Johnson's criticism or indeed his writing on human experience itself to say that his ultimate greatness lies in the example they provide. There is "no substitute," as Whitehead said, "for the direct perception of the concrete achievement of a thing in its actuality. We want concrete fact with a high light thrown on what is relevant to its preciousness." A part of this human relevance is that it proceeds from what is familiar to us and uses it. . . . The final "preciousness" comes in realizing that the concrete achievement is possible. Trust -- and from trust the open receptiveness that permits us to grow and learn from one

> another -- is instilled by the union of familiarity and triumph, however precarious and hard-won. In Johnson the triumph is not added to the familiarity: it rises through the familiarity and by means of it.[180]

Once again, then, we have an approach which is scarcely compatible with the idea of art as a realm having a separate mode of existence. Bate makes it plain that, in his view, literature is valuable because it "provides the greatest and most complete rendering or duplicate of humanity's experience." Hence he insists that the qualities of mind requisite in a literary critic are scarcely those of a detached aesthetician:

> We . . . want the healthful assurance and actual, concrete display that to pick one's way through the large, chaotic body of man's literature, evaluating and getting anything out of it, involves first of all the use of the same qualities of mind needed to extract any point or meaning from life itself.[181]

A major point of The Achievement of Samuel Johnson is that Johnson the critic provides an incomparable "concrete display" of picking one's way through literature, and, granted Bate's assumptions, it is incumbent upon him to demonstrate that Johnson's qualities of mind were not only forged but validated by his personal struggle with the many troubles which beset him, a struggle which, in Bate's view, ended in triumph and understanding. Indeed, Bate maintains that Johnson's adversities yielded him a "sense of the working of the human imagination [which is] the closest anticipation of Freud to be found in psychology or moral writing before the twentieth century."[182]

It seems clear, then, that the conception of Johnson's criticism which we find in The Achievement of Samuel Johnson goes somewhat beyond the notion of experience moving toward principle. In Bate's view, the general nature to which Johnson appealed is "a species of symbolic value; it proceeds through the concrete detail, but the test is still how applicable it is beyond."[183] As a matter of fact, Bate seems to say that, owing to his unique qualities of mind, Johnson could see in experience a "nature" which is, in fact, beyond experience:

> In Johnson the distinction between "nature" and "custom" remains limber and convincing because it starts from the principal fact of experience: the fact that genuine experience is an activity which touches home to what we already feel, starts out by taking hold of it, and then carries it farther into meaning.[184]

It is this suggestion that Johnson had something approximating transcendental insight into the ultimate implications of life which marks The Achievement of Samuel Johnson as a unique achievement in Johnson scholarship. By the same token, it is precisely because he believes that Johnson had such insight that Bate accords him a place by himself as a literary critic:

> The active dawning into meaning that Johnson so relished -- the activity in which life at last is felt to "go forwards," in which events can be "managed" and seen in perspective, while at the same time they stimulate, replenish, and stabilize the mind -- gives this conception of the function of art, "to instruct by pleasing," a human vitality and conviction that we can find in no other critic.[185]

There are, of course, glaring dissimilarities in the studies of Hagstrum, Keast, and Bate. But they belong together for a number of reasons. First, these three writers have, in their several ways, translated Johnson's critical ideas into systematic expositions which are highly congenial to twentieth century patterns of thought. Secondly, they have argued for the validity of Johnson's criticism on the basis of what has always been recognized in a general way as his strongest point: his prodigious understanding of human nature and human experience. Thirdly, in so arguing, they have launched what amounts to a major counterattack on the critical position of his most powerful modern detractors. Lastly, it may be pertinent to mention that these scholars must be acknowledged to stand on an equal footing with anyone who has seen fit to disparage Johnson's criticism in recent years. In one respect, therefore, Donald J. Greene's opinion that Johnson the critic is taken more seriously today than at any other time in history, including his own, is substantiated by the studies we have just been looking at. Surely, it seems unlikely that anyone has ever taken him more seriously than have Jean Hagstrum, W. R. Keast, and Walter Jackson Bate.

Greene's opinion was scarcely issued in a spirit of disinterested objectivity, however, and, as we have seen, the views of Hagstrum, Keast, and Bate cannot be said to represent a present-day consensus on the worth of Johnson's criticism. Of course, it could be argued that, in allowing Johnson's most eloquent recent advocates to have the last word in this

discussion, this writer has adopted a stance which is no less partisan than that of Greene. But here one might paraphrase Johnson on The Seasons and insist that, of many opinions subsisting all at once, no rule can be given why one should be mentioned before another. What is clearly more troublesome, however, is that no rule can be given why one should carry more weight than another. Consequently, although we can see at a glance that Johnson has scored spectacular gains since 1940 and that the line on his performance chart accordingly should reflect a steep and dramatic ascent, we cannot say with any degree of certainty how far that line should extend. Indeed, it seems clear at this juncture that the question of Johnson's precise standing and influence in our day is one which our grandchildren will have to decide. For the present, we can say only that it is a question on which even our most prominent scholars can be expected to disagree. To emphasize this point, we might end this chapter with a brief consideration of the interesting contrast provided by two authoritative judgments on Johnson's overall modern reputation, the first by a distinguished European scholar, H. W. Donner, the second by an American critic whom we have encountered frequently in the foregoing pages, M. H. Abrams. In his inaugural lecture before the University of Uppsala in 1952, Donner gave Johnson high marks indeed. Although he was convinced that Johnson's criticism was seriously flawed by "occasional over-emphasis on the necessary morality of art," Donner nevertheless concluded that

> Dr. Johnson's greatness as a critic, and a critic in the widest sense, towers perhaps even larger at the present day than ever before, because time has given it perspective. It has stood his own test of durability and has survived the aspersions of Romantics and post-Romantics alike, and is now universally acknowledged. . . . What is more, after two hundred years many of his judgments stand, and I doubt whether any critic after Aristotle has carried more weight.[186]

Writing a review of Hagstrum two years later, however, Abrams played his cards noticeably closer to his vest. It will be recalled at this point that Abrams was the first major American critic to defend Johnson's criticism after 1940, and one who has continued to insist on Johnson's parity with the greatest critics. Yet he was scarcely of Donner's opinion that Johnson's greatness had come to be, as of 1954, universally acknowledged. He conceded, of course, that it was no longer fashionable to damn Johnson out of hand, and he recognized, as we noted in Chapter One, that Johnson was "more and more becoming a part of our usable critical past."[187] Furthermore, he judged Hagstrum's Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism to be precisely the kind of book needed to increase Johnson's usefulness. But when it came to assessing Johnson's current reputation, Abrams characterized the attitude of his age as

> a checkered conception of Johnson as a dogmatist, yet, in Eliot's words, "a dangerous person to disagree with"; a man imprisoned in his 18th Century sensibility, but somehow capable of such flashes of insight as his pioneer analysis of metaphysical wit; a reader exasperatingly obtuse to the excel-

> lence of Shakespeare now most admired, whose observations on Shakespearean passages or characters nevertheless continue to provide points of departure for many modern commentaries.[188]

Needless to say, the evidence reviewed in this chapter inclines us to believe that, of the two judgments given, that of Abrams is probably closer to the mark. Our attitude toward Johnson, particularly as it is reflected in recent histories of criticism, obviously is a checkered conception. To be sure, it was argued in the first three chapters that the attitude of previous ages toward Johnson was probably more checkered than we have believed. Yet surely it will be admitted that we have arrived at a degree of disjunction in literary criticism unknown to our nineteenth century forebears, and that, as a consequence, a checkered reputation is the inevitable rather than the accidental condition of any major critical influence.[189] Indeed, glancing back over the writers surveyed in this chapter, we cannot be altogether certain that we find common theoretical ground where all of Johnson's supporters can stand together, let alone stand with his detractors. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to assume that, in Johnson's checkered reputation, we see -- in part, at least -- a rather accurate reflection of our distinctly piebald literary milieu.

In any case, it is clear that the variegated climate of our day has brought Johnson the critic far more profit than loss, and it should be recognized that, if the discussion in this chapter sustains Abrams' view of John-

son's present-day standing, it also goes a long way toward undergirding Donner's assessment of Johnson as the weightiest critic since Aristotle. Although admittedly they often seem to have little in common except a profound admiration for Johnson, an impressive number of our most widely respected critics nevertheless have not only recognized the enduring value of Johnson's criticism but cited Johnson himself as an incomparable example of what a literary critic ideally ought to be. Moreover, although we have noted the paradoxical nature of the relationship, it seems clear that Johnson has exerted a notable influence on T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, and it goes without saying that the critic who has influenced these two has, at least indirectly, influenced many more as well. Finally, as we shall see in the chapter which follows, a significant number of Johnson's specific judgments have stood the test of time. Therefore, it seems proper to conclude that, if our attitude toward Johnson continues to be a checkered conception, it is surely one in which the white can be seen to dominate the black.

NOTES

CHAPTER IV

[1]Some mention should be made of several late nineteenth and early twentieth century histories of criticism which will not be taken up in our text. Laura Johnson Wylie is interesting to us because her study -- originally a Yale Ph.D. dissertation in 1893 -- seems to confirm the fact that, around the turn of the century, Johnson's support was confined to the far side of the Atlantic. To be sure, Miss Wylie acknowledges that Johnson is far less hidebound than many of his predecessors. But she clearly assumes throughout that there are no major English critics between Dryden and Coleridge. See Studies in the Evolution of English Criticism (Boston, 1903), pp. 66, 85-86. Like other European writers we have considered (See Chapter Three, note 77), Paul Hamelius was preoccupied with the question of Johnson's exact standing in the shift from Classic to Romantic values. Identifying Johnson as "der fähigste und berühmteste Vertreter der neoklassischen Schuule," Hamelius does his best to break Johnson's thought down to Classical and Romantic components. But he reaches no very satisfactory conclusion: "Soll deshalb der Dichter, auf seine eigenen Kräfte vertrauend, Studien und Autoritäten verwerfen, um nur seinen Neigungen zu gehorchen? Diesen Schluss verwirft Johnson; er empfiehlt in etwas unbestimmten Worten die grossen Meister der alten Weisheit, ohne seinen Lesern mitteilen zu können, worin diese Weisheit besteht. Johnsons Aeusserungen [sic] über den Wert der Kritik sind so voll von Widersprüchen dass es unmöglich ist, seinen eigenen Standpunkt festzustellen. Literarischer Skeptizismus ist der einzige Name für seine ablehnende Haltung. Sie war eine Folge seiner peinlichen Wahrheitsliebe und des Misstrauens, womit er seine eignen Gedanken, wie auch fremde, prüfte. Ein einziges Mittel, den Wert eines Gedichtes zu erproben, lässt Johnson gelten: das ist die Zeit, die das Echte und Edle am Ende hervorzieht und erhält, während alles Gemeine untergeht. Johnson glaubt, dass dies das Kriterium des viel befolgten Boileau gewesen sei." Die Kritik in der englishchen Literatur des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts (Bruxelles, 1897), pp. 147-48. A later and perhaps more important writer, Wladyslaw Folkierski, is of interest to us for an entirely different reason. In his influential study of eighteenth century aesthetics he does not so much as mention Johnson's name. See Entre le classicisme et le romantisme. Étude sur l'esthétique et esthéticiens du XVIIIe siècle (Cracow, 1925).

[2]I (New Haven, 1955), vi.

[3](Edinburgh, 1949), II, 495.

[4]Ibid., p. 485.

[5]Ibid., p. 482. On the score of Johnson's ear, Saintsbury holds the view that Johnson had simply been incapable of monitoring the frequencies of such subtle musicians as Spenser and Milton (pp. 482, 490).

[6]Ibid., pp. 485-86.

[7]"Here and there extra-literary prejudice -- political-ecclesiastical, as in the case of Milton; partly moral, partly religious, and, it is to be feared, a little personal, as in that of Swift -- distorted the presentation. And it is quite possible that a similar distortion, due to the same causes or others, was in the case of Gray intensified by a half-unconscious conviction that Gray's aims and spirit, if not his actual poetical accomplishments, were fatal to the school of poetry to which the critic himself held" (p. 487).

[8]Ibid., p. 486.

[9]Ibid., p. 496.

[10]Ibid., p. 488.

[11]Ibid., p. 489.

[12]Ibid., p. 491.

[13]Concerning Johnson's preference for the numbers of Dryden and Pope to those of Spenser, Saintsbury says: "It is no valid retort that this is simply a difference of taste. If a man, as some men have done, says that Spenser is pleasing and Dryden and Pope are not, then the retort is valid. When the position is taken that both rhythms are pleasing, both really poetical, but poetical in a different way, the defender of it may laugh at all assailants" (p. 483).

[14]"Here at last, and here almost for the first time, appears that body of pure critical appreciation of the actual work of literature for which we have been waiting so long, which we have missed so sorely in ancient times, and which, in the earlier modern, has been given to us stinted and, what is worse, adulterated, by arbitrary restrictions and preoccupations. In Coleridge, in Hazlitt, in Lamb, in Leigh Hunt even, to name no others, we have real 'judging of authors,' not -- or at any rate not mainly -- discussion of kinds, and attempts to lay down principles. They are judges, not jurists,

'lawmen,' not lawmongers and potterers with codes. Appreciation and enjoyment, with their, in this case necessary, consequences, the communication of enjoyment and appreciation -- these are the chief and principal things with them, and these they never fail to provide" (Edinburgh, 1949), III, 413-14. In a note, Saintsbury remarks that the Germans did the sort of thing he is talking about "rather earlier but not so well: the French almost if not quite as well and more voluminously, but later" (p. 413, note 1).

[15]II, 483.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., p. 495.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., p. 496. Concerning Johnson's clarity of vision, Saintsbury makes the following observation in a later study: "His mental vision had qualities exactly the opposite of those of his bodily sight. He may see narrowly or at a wrong angle, but he always sees, and sees clearly what he sees." The Peace of the Augustans (London, 1916), p. 201.

[20](New York, 1953), p. viii.

[21]Ibid., p. v.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid., p. 115.

[24]Ibid., p. 128.

[25]Ibid., p. 127.

[26]Ibid., p. 312.

[27]"English Literature, 1660-1800: A Current Bibliography," PQ, X (1931), 177.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid. In fairness it should be noted that Crane credited Bosker with displaying on occasion "a certain vigor of mind and a capacity for large

views." He also believed Bosker's book had value owing to the many illustrative quotations from such minor critics as Stockdale, Pye, Harris, Twining, Hoole, Belsham, Hayley, Aiken, and Pinkerton.

[30]"On Writing the History of English Criticism," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXII (1953), 378.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid., pp. 379-80.

[33]Ibid., pp. 380-81.

[34](London, 1951), pp. v, 1.

[35]Ibid., p. 310. In his reference to the practice of gathering together "isolated fragments . . . which, torn from their context [,are] therefore distorted," Atkins clearly accuses others of a fault of which, in Crane's view, at least, he was himself guilty.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid., p. 311.

[38]Ibid., p. 312.

[39]Central to Atkins' argument is the idea that, in "refusing to accept neo-classicism as his creed, rejecting also the test of mere individual taste, [Johnson] found in the law of Nature or reason his guide; and in thus making his main test the appeal to the mind of rational man, he gave direction to contemporary criticism, and prepared the way at least for reasoned psychological methods yet more effective, when the mind of man had been more fully explored" (p. 311). Of Johnson's Shakespeare criticism, Atkins notes that "while later scholarship and heightened sensibilities were to lead to a fuller understanding of Shakespeare's art, [Johnson's] Preface remains one of historical and intrinsic interest, in virtue of his unerring skill in indicating essentials, his reasoned judicial methods, and the sound foundations he laid for future textual and aesthetic developments" (p. 243). Atkins sees the Lives of the Poets primarily as a great historical event: "Catalogue Lives and a few notable monographs had appeared before; but nothing comparable, either in scope or treatment, to Johnson's wide and significant survey of literary performances, embracing in Cowley certain aspects of an earlier period, in Milton the closing triumph of the Renascence

age, and then the new traditions of Dryden, Pope and Addison, with Gray and Collins opening up new vistas hitherto unappreciated. To-day the general picture thus presented has become familiar; but it was first indirectly outlined in Johnson's pages. . . . [The Lives are] in fact none other than a treasury of literary traditions, if not of antiquarian research, embodying material which, unsifted and unorganized previously, nevertheless gave new direction to critical studies in making the concern of critics from now on not so much the art of composing, as of appreciating, poetry" (p. 291). Although Johnson's Milton criticism poses serious problems, Atkins is able to point with approval to certain aspects of Johnson's discussion of Paradise Lost. Specifically, he notes that it is when Johnson "enlarges on Milton's treatment of [his] epic structure . . . that Johnson's critical insight most clearly emerges" (p. 295). Moreover, Atkins submits Johnson's inability to wish -- despite his many objections -- that Milton had written "otherwise than he did" as proof that Johnson is no "hide-bound pedant . . . applying cut-and-dried theories to the work in hand." He concludes that, for all his want of imagination, Johnson had "experienced aesthetically the elemental power of Milton's great poem" (p. 296). Concerning Johnson's "amazing and apparently insensate estimate of Lycidas," Atkins is more guarded. He notes that this notorious judgment probably stems from principle rather than prejudice, and concedes that "[i]t reveals, plainly enough, defective standards and deficiencies of ear and temperament, seen also in his deafness to the charm of the songs in Comus, or his half-hearted tribute to Milton's sonnets." He concludes with the observation that "it is possible to stress too strongly this particular lapse in his treatment of a subtle piece of poetry which lay outside his range of vision, especially when viewed against the background of his critical achievement as a whole" (pp. 294-95). As might be anticipated, Atkins comes closest to an objective estimate in his discussion of Johnson's criticism of Addison, Dryden, and Pope. He clearly finds Johnson's discussion of Addison's criticism to be congenial and emphasizes his approval of Johnson's judgment that "Addison had provided the criticism that was needed in his day." But he hastens to add that "when Johnson demurs to Addison's estimate of Chevy Chase he himself is at fault" (p. 304). In a similar vein, Atkins asserts that "It is in his treatment of Dryden's critical work . . . that Johnson's own greatness . . . is forced upon us," primarily, it would seem, because Johnson's genuine admiration for his subjects causes him to write "with an unwonted warmth of feeling" (p. 298). In addition, Atkins singles out for special praise the "masterly use made of the comparative method" in the discussion of Dryden and Pope in the Life of the latter poet (p. 302). But Atkins' true colors are never more evident than in his consideration of Johnson's criticism of Collins and Gray: "Nowhere . . . are Johnson's shortcomings attended with more unfortunate results than in his

treatment of Collins and Gray, those harbingers of a later spring whose lyrical flights he was unable to follow" (p. 308).

[40]Ibid., p. 313.

[41]"On Writing the History of English Criticism, 1650-1800," p. 381. Needless to say, these studies had already appeared prior to Crane's review of Atkins. Keast's "The Theoretical Foundations of Johnson's Criticism" had appeared in Critics and Criticism, edited by Crane and published in 1952. Indeed, Crane cites this essay in the review under consideration here as an example "of the type of analysis I have in mind" (p. 382). M. H. Abrams had published his "Unconscious Expectations in the Reading of Poetry" somewhat earlier in ELH, IX (1942), 235-45. Hagstrum's Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism appeared in the year following the publication of Atkins' history, 1952.

[42]Crane suggests that "for all the good they have done him most of the many excellent articles on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century criticism in the learned journals of the past three decades might as well not have been written" (p. 377). M. H. Abrams likewise voices the opinion that "almost total neglect of [scholarship published between 1900 and 1950] made J. W. H. Atkins' volumes on English criticism through the eighteenth century all but obsolete at the time of publication." See his review of René Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, vols. I and II, Yale Review, XLV (1955), 147.

[43]Philological Papers: University of West Virginia, series 52, no. 4-I (October 1951), 79.

[44]T. S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition (London, 1960), p. 58.

[45]"Samuel Johnson and the Critical Heritage of T. S. Eliot," Studia Germanica Gandensia, VI (1964), 231. The passage cited by Mowat reads as follows: "I may commend as a model to critics who desire to correct some of the poetical vagaries of the present age, the following passage from a writer who cannot be accused of flaccid leniency, and the justice of whose criticism must be acknowledged even by those who feel a strong partiality toward the school of poets criticized." The Sacred Wood (London, 1920), p. xiv.

[46]Selected Essays (New York, 1950), p. 250.

[47]"Samuel Johnson and the Critical Heritage of T. S. Eliot," p. 233.

[48]Ibid., p. 240. Miss Murdoch's remarks are set forth in "T. S. Eliot as a Moralist," T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for his Seventieth Birthday (London, 1958), p. 155. Bate's remarks are found in The Achievement of Samuel Johnson (New York, 1955), p. 208.

[49]Ibid., p. 241.

[50]"Johnson as Critic and Poet," On Poetry and Poets (New York, 1955), p. 185.

[51]"Samuel Johnson and the Critical Heritage of T. S. Eliot," p. 243. Edward Emley also observes that "Reading Eliot's summary of Dr. Johnson, the critic, one suspects that Eliot envies the more settled age in which Johnson held forth and that he would prefer the more stable tradition which Johnson upheld so ably." "Dr. Johnson and Modern Criticism," p. 78.

[52](London, 1933), pp. 64-65.

[53]"Samuel Johnson and the Critical Heritage of T. S. Eliot," p. 243.

[54]"Johnson as Critic and Poet," p. 201.

[55]Ibid., pp. 184-85.

[56]Ibid., p. 192.

[57]Ibid., p. 203.

[58]Ibid., p. 212.

[59]Ibid., pp. 220-21.

[60]Ibid., p. 209.

[61]Ibid., pp. 221-22.

[62]Ibid., p. 212.

[63]Ibid.

[64]See note 59 above. Eliot stressed the fact that "For such judgment of literature to be the normal and natural task of a critic, a settled society is necessary." In his Preface of 1853, Arnold admits that the ancient poet

was able to achieve the grand style in the stark and ritualistic imitation of human action precisely because that action derived from some "terrible old mythic story" which stood in the consciousness of poet and audience alike ". . . as a group of statuary, faintly seen at the end of a long and dark vista." "Preface to Poems, 1853," Victorian Prose, ed. Frederick William Roe (New York, 1947), p. 421.

[65]It is possible, of course, that Eliot tends to idealize the relationship between the critic and his culture. In the earlier essay, he had recognized that the Age of Johnson was something of a misnomer, and that "Lonely in his life, Johnson seems to me still more lonely in his intellectual and moral existence." The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, p. 63. But when he dwells on the relationship between Johnson's criticism and its cultural tradition in the later essay, he often gives the impression that he is envisioning some sort of critical utopia. Our resumé of recent scholarship on the subject of Johnson's standing in his own day suggests that Johnson's situation was less utopian, perhaps, than Eliot assumes.

[66]"Dr. Johnson and Modern Criticism," p. 79. Although they have not written extensively on Johnson, the views of I. A. Richards and William Empson obviously merit some attention in this study. Since these critics are often discussed in the same context with Leavis, it may be proper to take them up at this point. Like so many others before him, I. A. Richards believed that Johnson merits our respect because he was a rudimentary precursor of Coleridge. Although he concludes that Johnson's mind was essentially opaque to metaphor, Richards nevertheless contends that it is Johnson who "shows us best the first steps of that reflective analytical scrutiny and comparison of meaning in poetry which is later to make a vast stride in Coleridge." Coleridge and the Imagination (New York, 1935), p. 124. William Empson, on the other hand, appears to believe that Johnson's criticism has at least some intrinsic merit. For example, he clearly approves of Johnson's remarks on the correspondence between sound and sense in Rambler 92. See Seven Types of Ambiguity, rev. ed. (New York, 1947), p. 12. Moreover, he concurs with Johnson on Shakespeare's punning and wishes that "the Bard had been more mannerly in his literary habits" (p. 86). He likewise believes that -- lacking a clearly defined clash of different modes of feeling -- the pastoral is indeed a bore (p. 114). At another point, he insists that "Johnson's good sense [is] a quality urgent for literary critics" (p. 123). More importantly, he cites Johnson's approach to literary questions as a healthy example to readers of modern poetry (p. 255). In this connection, Jean Hagstrum suggests that "I. A. Richards and William Empson have, in their preoccupation with Coleridge and other critics, never fully realized their own affinity with the psychology and semantics of Johnson." "Preface, 1967," p. xi.

[67]"The Function of Criticism," Selected Essays, p. 14.

[68](New York, 1964). p. 1.

[69]"Johnson as Critic," Samuel Johnson, a Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Donald J. Greene (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), p. 78.

[70]"Johnson and Augustanism," The Common Pursuit (London, 1952), p. 110.

[71]"Johnson as Critic," p. 85.

[72]Ibid., p. 70.

[73]Ibid., p. 86.

[74]"Johnson and Augustanism," p. 113.

[75]Education and the University, a Sketch for an "English School" (New York, 1948), p. 106.

[76]"Dr. Johnson and Modern Criticism," p. 80.

[77]Ibid., p. 82.

[78]"Reëxamining Dr. Johnson," Samuel Johnson, a Collection of Critical Essays, p. 13.

[79]Ibid., p. 14.

[80]Ibid., p. 13.

[81]Selected Essays, p. 245.

[82]Ibid.

[83]In their more extreme anti-historical arguments, the New Critics may have carried this idea further than Eliot cared to see it go. In any event, Eliot tended to throw cold water on the idea that he had been so influential in modern criticism. In 1956, he said: "I have been somewhat bewildered to find, from time to time, that I am regarded as one of the ancestors of modern criticism, if too old to be a modern critic myself. Thus in a book which I read recently by an author who is certainly a modern

critic, I find a reference to 'The New Criticism'; by which, he says, 'I mean not only the American critics, but the whole critical movement that derives from T. S. Eliot.' I don't understand why the author should isolate me so sharply from the American critics; but on the other hand I fail to see any critical movement which can be said to derive from myself, though I hope that as an editor I gave the New Criticism, or some of it, encouragement and an exercise ground in The Criterion." "The Frontiers of Criticism," On Poetry and Poets, p. 117. It is in this same essay that Eliot characterizes the work of I. A. Richards and William Empson as "the lemon-squeezer school of criticism" (p. 125).

[84](Chapel Hill, 1939), p. viii.

[85]Ibid., pp. viii-ix.

[86]Ibid., p. 26.

[87]Ibid., p. 22.

[88]David Daiches has recently noted that "the high esteem now enjoyed by Dr. Johnson shows how premature was Cleanth Brooks's lumping in 1939 of 'Neo-Classics and Romantics' as opposed to modernists. . . . It is perhaps paradoxical that some of the most subtle critical minds in modern America have been concerned to provide appreciative analyses of Johnson's critical method, in spite of the fact that Johnson condemned the metaphysical style, or at least damned it with faint praise." English Literature (Englewood Cliffs, 1964), p. 79.

[89]Modern Poetry and the Tradition, p. 48.

[90]A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, II (New Haven, 1955), 3. Wellek's most extended explanation of the separateness of the work of art is set forth in Chapter XII ("The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art") of Theory of Literature, which he wrote in collaboration with Austin Warren. See (New York, 1956), pp. 129-45.

[91]A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, I, 79.

[92]Ibid., p. 85.

[93]Ibid., p. 83. Wellek makes it clear that Johnson is aware of the conflict but maintains that the moralist in him usually got the better of the realist (pp. 83-84).

[94]Ibid., pp. 80-81.

[95]Ibid., p. 81.

[96]Ibid., p. 85.

[97]Ibid.

[98]Ibid., p. 89.

[99]Ibid., p. 101.

[100]Ibid., p. 87.

[101]Ibid., p. 99.

[102]Shakespeare Quarterly, VIII (1957), 224.

[103]"An Indispensable Book," Virginia Quarterly Review, XXXII (1956), 312. In his Introduction to Samuel Johnson, a Collection of Critical Essays, Donald J. Greene quotes the following statement about Johnson without identifying its source: "More than half-deaf, and more than half-blind . . . his response [was] limited almost entirely to the conceptual aspects of poetry." In a note, Greene says, "Incredibly, this judgment, which sounds like the most benighted mid-Victorianism, was published in the 1950s in a serious work by a Canadian critic of some prominence, head of the Department of English in one of the older Canadian universities" (p. 4). A diligent search has failed to uncover the source of the statement alluded to; however, it seems a safe bet that it comes from Northrop Frye. It also seems pertinent to point out that the sentiment expressed is not, after all, such an anomaly.

[104](New York, 1964), p. vii. Indeed, the authors go further. They say of their book: "Call it An Argumentative History of Literary Argument in the West" (p. vii).

[105]Ibid., p. x.

[106]Ibid., p. 748.

[107]Concerning the emergence of the "principle of imaginative 'coalescence'" in England, Wimsatt and Brooks have this to say about Coleridge: "Coleridge added the deepening and fortification of German meta-

physics -- the epistemology of 'object' and 'subject,' or the imaginative reconciliation of these two opposites and along with them of art and nature, emotion and thought, the universal and the particular, and other satellites. Coleridge and Wordsworth show in a manageable landscape vignette what the larger and more varied movement of German romanticism, the poetry and theory of Goethe and Schiller and Novalis, the lectures of the Schlegels, the philosophy of Kant, Schelling and Fichte, was in the process of doing for the whole history of modern poetry and aesthetics in the West " (pp. 728-29). Wellek does not give Coleridge nearly so much credit; indeed, in a sense he deals with him more roughly than he deals with Johnson, making him out to be little better than a plagiarist of German critics. See A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, II, 152-58.

[108]Literary Criticism, A Short History, p. 316.

[109]Ibid., p. 333.

[110]See his The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson (New Haven, 1941), and Philosophic Words: A Study of Style and Meaning in the "Rambler" and "Dictionary" of Samuel Johnson (New Haven, 1948).

[111]Literary Criticism, A Short History, p. 323.

[112]Ibid., pp. 323-25.

[113]Ibid., p. 325.

[114]Ibid., pp. 326, 327-28.

[115]See The Verbal Icon (Lexington, 1953), pp. 21-39.

[116]Literary Criticism, A Short History, p. 331.

[117]Ibid., p. 334.

[118]In Defense of Reason (Denver, n. d.), p. 565. Winters' remark on Johnson is, of course, prominently cited to support the idea of a Johnsonian come-back. See James L. Clifford's "A Survey of Johnsonian Studies, 1950-1960," Johnsonian Studies, ed. Magdi Wahba (Cairo, 1962), p. 276, and Donald J. Greene's "Introduction," Samuel Johnson, A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 5. Stanley Edgar Hyman has noted the tendency of modern reviewers to see Johnsonian influence in Winters' criticism. See The Armed Vision, A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism (New York, 1948), p. 62.

[119]"The Critic Who Knew What He Wanted," College English, IX (1948), 300.

[120]Ibid., p. 302.

[121]Ibid., p. 300.

[122]The English Critic (London, 1952), p. 4.

[123]Ibid., pp. 18-19.

[124]Ibid., pp. 13-14.

[125]Ibid., p. 9.

[126]Ibid., p. 10.

[127]Ibid.

[128]Ibid., pp. 10-11.

[129]"The English Critic," December 12, 1952, p. 819.

[130]Ibid.

[131]"Dr. Johnson's Spectacles," New Light on Dr. Johnson, ed. Frederick W. Hilles (New Haven, 1959), p. 177. A more extended version of the essay appeared as "Unconscious Expectations in the Reading of Poetry," ELH, IX (1942), 235-45.

[132]Ibid., p. 187.

[133](New York, 1958), pp. 4-5.

[134]Ibid., pp. 20-21.

[135]Ibid., p. 19.

[136](Englewood Cliffs, 1956), p. x. In Daiches' text, these words are italicized.

[137]Ibid., pp. 247-48.

[138](Baltimore, 1962), p. 10. Watson's remarks throw an interesting light on the problem posed by Atkins' somewhat anachronistic English Literary Criticism: 17th and 18th Centuries. One has every right to infer from the quotation given that Atkins is a contemporary of Saintsbury; but the fact remains that his book was published in 1951, the same year in which the first two volumes of Wellek's A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950 appeared and a full half-century after the publication of Saintsbury's A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe. One can only infer that Watson's confusion on this point stems from the fact that Atkins' study conveys the impression of being a much earlier book.

[139]Ibid., p. 11.

[140]The Mirror and the Lamp, p. 5.

[141]The Literary Critics, pp. 104-105.

[142]Ibid., p. 83.

[143]Ibid., p. 11.

[144]Ibid., p. 14.

[145]Ibid., p. 81.

[146]Ibid.

[147]Ibid., pp. 81-82.

[148]Ibid., p. 30.

[149]Ibid., p. 82.

[150]Ibid., p. 83.

[151]Ibid., p. 85.

[152]Ibid.

[153]Ibid., p. 87.

[154]Ibid., p. 88.

[155]Ibid.

[156]McNulty acknowledges his debt to Macaulay. See "The Critic Who Knew What He Wanted," p. 302.

[157]See Chapter Two, note 25.

[158]Essays in Retrospect, p. 28.

[159](London, 1962), pp. 103-04.

[160]Ibid., pp. 204 ff.

[161]The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry (Toronto, 1953), p. xiii.

[162]Critics and Criticism (Abridged Edition) (Chicago, 1960), p. 179. Wellek likewise connects Johnson's ideas on the general with Neo-Platonic aesthetics and notes that "practically all critical theory since Johnson has run in the opposite direction." A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, I, 86-87.

[163]"Preface, 1967" (Chicago, 1967), p. vii.

[164]Ibid., p. xvi.

[165]Ibid., p. 6. Robert Voitle has challenged Hagstrum on this score. Voitle insists that Johnson's thought is grounded in two eighteenth century concepts of the rational faculty: Lockean empiricism and "Peripatetic reason," under which Voitle lumps "all survivals of the traditional notion of the faculty psychology." Samuel Johnson the Moralist (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), p. 12. Rodman D. Rhodes has contended that the approaches of Hagstrum and Voitle are too narrow. He believes that "in regard to literature, Johnson was primarily concerned with the mind's activity." "Idler No. 24 and Johnson's Epistemology," MP, LXIV (1966), 11. For an additional consideration of Johnson's epistemology, one which is compatible with that of Rhodes, see R. K. Kaul, "Dr. Johnson on Matter and Mind," Johnsonian Studies, ed. Magdi Wahba (Cairo, 1962), pp. 101-08. Some mention should likewise be made here of Martin Kallich's efforts to demonstrate the influence of Locke's psychological theories on Johnson's criticism, particularly on Johnson's ideas concerning the propriety of diction and subject matter. See "The Association of Ideas in Samuel Johnson's Criticism," MLN, LXIX (1954), 170-76.

[166]Ibid., p. 7. In Chapter VII, "True Wit," Hagstrum deals at some length with Johnson's ideas about the mind's ability to "combine, divide, and order" the reality of experience. W. K. Wimsatt believes that this chapter constitutes an effort "to attribute to Johnson an almost Coleridgean view of the imagination as reconciliation and transvaluation, the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the discordia concors." See Literary Criticism, A Short History, p. 330, note 8.

[167]Ibid.

[168]Ibid., p. 178.

[169]Ibid., p. 37. In response to Hagstrum's emphasis on the validity of this conception of poetry W. K. Wimsatt runs true to form. He complains about Hagstrum's psychologism throughout but notes that his "most serious exaggeration of psychologism appears in placing the topic of generality or universality not in Chapter IV (Nature) but in Chapter V (Pleasure)." In other words, Wimsatt rejects the notion that artistic universality is to be found in the number of people who respond to a work of art. He insists in any case that Johnson's ideas about universality have their roots in the classical and scholastic conception of "species." MLN, LXIX (1954), 129.

[170]Ibid., p. 36.

[171]"Samuel Johnson Ein Forschungsbericht," Die Neueren Sprachen (September, 1959), p. 403.

[172]"The Theoretical Foundations of Johnson's Criticism," p. 180.

[173]Ibid., p. 178.

[174]Ibid., pp. 179-80.

[175]"English Literature, 1660-1800: A Current Bibliography," PQ, XXXII (1953), 277-78.

[176](New York, 1961), p. 10.

[177](New York, 1961), p. 240, note 30.

[178]Ibid., p. v.

[179]Ibid., p. vii.

[180]Ibid., p. 233.

[181]Ibid., pp. 230-31.

[182]Ibid., p. 93.

[183]Ibid., p. 199.

[184]Ibid., p. 181.

[185]Ibid., p. 207.

[186]"Dr. Johnson as a Literary Critic," Samuel Johnson, a Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 108, 102.

[187]"The Truth About Dr. Johnson," p. 308.

[188]Ibid.

[189]For an authoritative appraisal of the modern critical scene, see Graham Hough, An Essay on Criticism (London, 1966), p. 87, passim. Although Hough paints a bleak picture, he nevertheless remains convinced that it is "not in principle impossible to discover the bases on which literary judgment really rests" (p. 87). Significantly, he points to Samuel Johnson as a critic who can give us "sensible, practical" guidance in solving our problems (pp. 87-88).

CHAPTER V

A CHECKERED CONCEPTION, CONTINUED: SPECIFIC JUDGMENTS AND SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES

Although nineteenth century commentators were perhaps not quite so uniformly contemptuous of Johnson's Shakespeare criticism as some twentieth century authorities have believed, it is nevertheless true that between 1850 and 1910 the Shakespeare criticism was relatively neglected while the Lives of the Poets was, as we have seen, frequently published and reviewed. One reason for this disparity is obvious enough. The Lives is simply more amenable to separate publication than the Preface and Notes to Shakespeare. There is a more significant reason why the Shakespeare criticism lagged behind, however. With the exception of Milton and possibly Gray, Johnson did not write the life of any poet whom the nineteenth century held to be supremely great. But he had clearly walked on sacred ground in editing and commenting on Shakespeare. Accordingly, although we have noted one or two writers of the period who cheered Johnson's refusal to cringe before the Bard, it seems highly probable that most nineteenth century commentators shared something of John Bailey's indignation at Johnson's practice of reviewing the works of Shakespeare "with the confidence of a school-master going over a boy's exercise."[1] It is, of course, generally recognized that Coleridge was largely

responsible for laying on the quasi-religious tone which characterized Shakespeare criticism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coleridge, it will be remembered, held Shakespeare to be not merely great but an artist of divine if occasionally obscure perfection. Moreover, he stated his views in a manner which could scarcely fail to have an adverse effect on Johnson's reputation, for, as T. M. Raysor explains it, Coleridge not only singled out the Preface for "persecution" in several lost lectures of 1811 and 1812 but attacked Johnson "in all his lectures . . . with a persistency which exposed him to the charge of repetition."[2]

Clear proof that the Coleridgean attitude survived into the early twentieth century is found in a review of Sir Walter Raleigh's Johnson on Shakespeare, a review which appeared in a 1908 issue of the Spectator. Writing under the title "Shakespeare on Johnson," the reviewer said:

> Shakespeare, for all of us, is one of those facts about which we stand in no need of comment; our relation to him -- like our relation to the stars in heaven -- is something quite definite, although, of course, in neither case could we express in words what that relation is.[3]

Hence the title of the essay. In the reviewer's opinion, it was not proper to say that Johnson had passed judgment on Shakespeare. Instead, he believed it was a case of Johnson himself "being brought up for judgment before a superior power."[4]

From 1910 onward, however, commentators on Johnson's Shake-

speare criticism seem to have taken their cue not from Coleridge but from D. Nichol Smith and Sir Walter Raleigh, and, as a result, Joseph Wood Krutch was able to qualify his estimate of Johnson's standing as a critic as of 1944. Although he noted a general tendency "to dismiss [Johnson's] criticism as pedantic and unimaginative," he also pointed out that "many of the most competent of those who have recently written about Shakespeare speak of Johnson with great respect both as editor and as critic."[5] Certainly, the historians of Shakespeare criticism who are heard from in the nineteen-twenties and thirties offer an interesting contrast to other writers of the same period whom we surveyed in Chapter Three. Although some of these historians occasionally seem to be writing about Johnson with one eye on Coleridge, all of them agree with Smith and Raleigh that Johnson not only made solid contributions to the progress of Shakespeare criticism but wrote commentaries of great intrinsic value as well. Indeed, it was D. Nichol Smith himself who continued to lead the way in assessing the merits of eighteenth century Shakespeare criticism. In his Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century, which appeared in 1928, Smith insists again that "in all respects [Johnson's] edition is incomparably superior [to Theobald's]. . . . His text is easily the best that had yet appeared."[6] Smith acknowledges that we have better texts today, of course, but repeats his earlier claim that Johnson's Notes remain supreme -- an opinion which has come to be widely-held in our day, although, as we shall see a few pages further along, the

Notes are, in fact, the subject of one of the most notable recent controversies in Johnson scholarship.

If the historians of Shakespeare criticism who are heard from in the early nineteen-thirties are not quite so affirmative as Smith, they nevertheless emphasize what they consider to be Johnson's achievements and endeavor to mitigate what they consider to be his flaws. Augustus Ralli, for example, relegates Johnson's Notes to a position of secondary importance owing to what he considers Johnson's insensitivity to Shakespeare's "ability to unveil a mystery."[7] In addition, he is convinced that most modern readers will not agree with Johnson that Shakespeare's comedy excels his tragedy. But he also believes that the Preface is a landmark in Shakespeare criticism owing to Johnson's application of "strong sense" to the problem of the unities and to the then prevailing objections against mingled comedy and tragedy. Unfortunately, however, he also suggests that Johnson's no-nonsense approach to Shakespeare is useful to the modern reader in another and perhaps more questionable way:

> The present day has a use for his fault-finding which the age of faith had not. Because he is not awed by Shakespeare he can see clearly what is before him, and tell the truth about All's Well and Cymbeline, and thus join hands across the gulf with those of us at the present day who reject the Folio as the work of one man.[8]

Writing in the same year as Ralli, 1932, V. K. Pillai likewise stresses the importance of the Preface, but not at the expense of the Notes. Although

he is willing to concede that Johnson may not have given sufficient emphasis in the Preface to "the transcendent quality of [Shakespeare's] imagination," he argues that Johnson's "massive and penetrating common sense helps him to see through the mists of criticism [and enables him to make] observations on many of the points in Shakespeare's art [which] are final."[9] Like Smith, however, Pillai cites the Notes as Johnson's greatest and most enduring contribution: "A student accustomed to using the Variorum Shakespeare instinctively turns his eyes . . . to the notes of Johnson and he is never disappointed."[10] Yet it is interesting to note that Pillai occasionally seems to be at one with other writers of his day who tended, as we have seen, to judge Johnson's importance in terms of his role as a transitional critic. Of Johnson's defense of Shakespeare in the matter of mingled drama, Pillai says: "Here Johnson is almost anticipating the great critical principle emphasized by Coleridge that a great work of art reveals the laws by which it has to be judged."[11]

Herbert S. Robinson, also writing in 1932, is likewise convinced that Johnson's remarks on mixed tragedy and comedy constitute "a perfect anticipation of the view insisted on by Coleridge."[12] Moreover, like many another critic before him, he is clearly troubled by what he considers Johnson's "tendency to make dramatic art subservient to a system of moral values" as well as by Johnson's emphatic opinion that "there is always something wanting in Shakespeare's tragedies."[13] But Robinson gets

around this difficulty by making a careful distinction between Johnson the critic on the one hand and Johnson the resolute Christian and unsuccessful dramatist on the other, and, in the end, he awards Johnson a place in the front rank of the editors and critics of Shakespeare. To be sure, Robinson does make the usual concession that "Johnson may clearly be defective on the aesthetic side," but he also insists on its corollary -- that "when a problem is one that may be settled by reason, [Johnson is] a thorough master of the situation."[14] Robinson does not believe that Johnson's reason is seen at its best in the Notes, however. Although he acknowledges that Johnson's Notes are superior to those of any other eighteenth century editor,[15] he nevertheless concludes that Johnson's major contribution to Shakespeare criticism is the Preface, which he designates

> as the first attempt to arrive at a judicial estimate of Shakespeare's greatness. Honesty, frankness, and plain common-sense, -- qualities which served to make Johnson a commanding figure in his age, -- are the distinguishing characteristics of his summary of faults and virtues.[16]

On balance, then, Krutch's estimate in Samuel Johnson appears to have been sound. In the first four decades of the twentieth century, Johnson the critic plainly did enjoy a noticeably higher standing among commentators on Shakespeare than he did in the world of letters generally. It should be made clear, however, that the distinction has more significance for us (it is a point we shall return to later on) than it did for Krutch. He mentions

it only casually at the outset of a chapter in which he is far more interested in upgrading Johnson's current standing that in tracing his reputation in ages past. Obviously, then, his emphasis is on the critical side of Johnson's Shakespearean labors. Yet we should note that, like D. Nichol Smith, Krutch sees Johnson as one of Shakespeare's most important editors as well:

> [W]hatever Johnson's defects may have been he was at least, when everything had been taken into consideration, so much the best yet to appear that no subsequent editor for a very long time to come ever thought either of making a clean sweep of his work or of going back to any of his predecessors for a starting point. Yet to this it certainly must be added that, as an editor, he is the last and best of one school rather more than the first of another. His method was to supplement good sense with knowledge and research. His successors have tended to supplement knowledge and research with good sense -- when they could muster it. Perhaps this means that Johnson carried the method of good sense as far as it can be carried.[17]

On the critical side, however, Krutch is plainly convinced that Johnson's method of good sense has yet to be superseded. In this connection, it was suggested at the conclusion of Chapter Three that Krutch's defense of Johnson's this-worldly conception of the imagination probably marks the starting point of the latest revival of Johnson's criticism. It will be recalled, perhaps, that Krutch's remarks on this score are advanced in support of Johnson's conception of Shakespeare as the poet of nature, the poet who, as Krutch sees it, "seems most completely to have realized

the ideal of knowledge which Imlac had described for the benefit of Rasselas."[18] In essence, Krutch argues that, in concentrating on Shakespeare's "power to represent what the reader recognizes as a true picture of human nature and human life," Johnson had not only dealt admirably with that aspect of Shakespeare's art which the majority of readers doubtless will always value most, but, in the process, had probably accounted for as much of Shakespeare's greatness as can be satisfactorily conceptualized.[19] Indeed, Krutch strongly implies that later critics who endeavored to follow Shakespeare into realms more "tenuously connected with the common experience of mankind" had simply vanished into the mists in pursuit of the inexplicable.[20]

In addition to landing hard on long-standing complaints about Johnson's imaginative deficiency, Krutch likewise seems to have had just about the last word on two other hoary objections: that Johnson was too rigidly didactic and that he lacked that degree of reverence which Coleridge deemed proper in a critic of Shakespeare. Although Krutch clearly believes that eighteenth century criticism was seriously handicapped by the prevailing assumption that poetry should teach explicit moral lessons, he nevertheless argues that Johnson's didacticism poses no real problem in the Shakespeare criticism. To be sure, he admits that Johnson is absolute in his insistence that "the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing," so absolute that

> one wonders not at Johnson's mild complaint that a failure to enforce moral lessons must be listed among Shakespeare's defects, but that the poet is not therefore summarily dismissed rather than accepted as, all things considered, incomparably the greatest of the moderns.[21]

But Krutch goes on to demonstrate that Johnson's bark is far worse than his bite on this score, and concludes that it seems "reasonable to say . . . that, at the cost of a certain amount of inconsistency, he treats what he proclaims a major deficiency as though it were, in reality, a very minor one."[22]

As might be anticipated, Krutch's remarks are somewhat more ascerbic when he turns to those who would disqualify Johnson on grounds of irreverence:

> Those [who follow Coleridge in believing that a "reverential tone" is the test of Shakespeare criticism] will certainly think Johnson a bad critic, for his tone is certainly less reverential than it is "manly." But an attitude such as his has one great advantage. It leads a critic to expose freely whatever limitations we need take into consideration when reading him, and it makes it unnecessary for him to obscure his own writing with grandiose tributes to ineffable qualities even when he is discovering them only in order to demonstrate how "reverential" he can be.[23]

In substance, then, Krutch can be said to make a good case for the proposition that Johnson -- the critic who believed that Shakespeare was great because he had, better than any other modern, held up a mirror to nature -- is scarcely inferior in any meaningful sense to later critics who endeavored to explain Shakespeare's greatness in more esoteric terms.

Indeed, Krutch suggests that these later critics may have done their subject a disservice, for, as he observes,

> Shakespeare tended to lose popularity in the widest sense of the term as he became more and more the possession of critics who laid more and more stress upon qualities which the uninstructed could hardly be expected either to perceive or to value.[24]

But there may be an element of paradox in Krutch's final estimate, for he seems to acknowledge that Johnson was himself instrumental in placing Shakespeare in the hands of the scholars and thus necessarily at a further remove from the general public. He explains that, on the historical side, Johnson the critic is important because he "contributed powerfully to the process, already pretty far advanced when he wrote, through which Shakespeare was becoming established as a genuine classic and unquestionably the first of modern poets."[25]

Writing in 1944, the same year that Krutch published Samuel Johnson, J. Dover Wilson advanced another theory concerning the historical context of Johnson's Shakespeare criticism. In addition to claiming that Johnson tells us more about Falstaff in seven sentences than Bradley manages to do in "twenty-seven eloquent pages," he expresses the opinion that the modern reader of Shakespeare's history plays derives an important extra dividend from the fact that Johnson wrote on Shakespeare when he did and not later. In the opening chapter of The Fortunes of Falstaff, which bears the significant title "Introduction: Back to Johnson," Wilson states his

case as follows:

> Shakespeare lived in the world of Plato and St. Augustine; since the French Revolution we have been living in the world of Rousseau; and this fact lays many traps of misunderstanding for unsuspecting readers. . . . And of all the plays, those dealing with historical or political themes are most liable to be thus misread. But Dr. Johnson still lived in Shakespeare's world, a world which was held together, and could only be held together, by authority based on and working through a carefully preserved gradation of rank. He was never tired of proclaiming the virtues of the Principle of Subordination, a principle which lies at the root of Plato's Republic and finds magnificent rhetorical expression in the speech on Degree which Shakespeare gives his Ulysses. Johnson's view on the political plays, the greatest of which is Henry IV, merits therefore our most careful attention, since the chances are that, sharing as he did Shakespeare's political assumptions, he will understand his intentions better than we do.[26]

Interestingly enough, however, the most notable recent controversy in the area of Johnson's Shakespeare criticism has not been concerned with the historical significance of his edition, or, indeed, with a question that is really relevant to his critical acumen. Instead, the controversy stems from a charge which Arthur Sherbo has raised concerning Johnson's integrity, particularly his integrity as a writer of Notes to Shakespeare. Prior to examining Sherbo's charges in detail, it may be helpful to focus our attention briefly on the twentieth century's attitude toward Johnson's Notes. As we have seen in this chapter and also in Chapter Three, a significant number of prominent modern writers have designated the Notes as Johnson's

main contribution to Shakespeare criticism. Indeed, some of them have gone so far as to suggest that, as a commentator on Shakespeare's text, Johnson continues to be unrivaled for common sense and knowledge of human nature. Not surprisingly, it is D. Nichol Smith who provides us with the most emphatic statement of this point of view:

> There are several kinds of explanatory notes, but there are two main kinds; there are those which require historical knowledge, whether of events, or social conditions or habits, or books, or language; and there are those which require knowledge of human nature; and in the kind of notes which alone could be written if all the libraries in the world were burned, and we had nothing to guide us but our common sense and what we know of our fellow creatures and of the workings of the head and of the heart, Johnson is supreme. In all those passages where scholarship and historical knowledge fail to give us their aid there is still no more helpful guide than he. Once we know him we may be trusted to ask, when baffled by a difficult passage, "What does Johnson say?"[27]

Moreover, it seems clear that Johnson's Notes have not only been widely admired by twentieth century critics but widely adopted by twentieth century editors. To be sure, Arthur M. Eastman has argued that Johnson's reputation suffered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries precisely because subsequent editors had ignored the Notes.[28] But Warren Fleischauer has vigorously and, it would seem, successfully defended Johnson's successors against Eastman's charge of neglect:

> The respectful reception and thorough consideration accorded Johnson's commentary by modern editors,

> even when they have most vigorously rebutted it, as well as their adoption with acknowledgement of the eighteenth century editor's paraphrases and glosses, have been made so patent [in my study] that Dr. Eastman's allegation against the scholarly integrity and diligence or [sic] nearly two centuries of Shakespearean commentators is no less than scandalous. Even the most superficial acquaintance with any of the several, but particularly of the more recent, volumes of the New Variorum edition could have spared Dr. Eastman his obvious misstatement of fact. Even the most cursory glance at any of the volumes of The New Cambridge Edition, particularly those edited by J. Dover Wilson, would have confuted Dr. Eastman's assertion, as would have the most casual examination of the notes in Kittredge's edition.[29]

All things considered, then, it can be said that Johnson's Notes had attained a high place in the esteem of a great many twentieth century Shakespeare scholars when, in 1956, Arthur Sherbo charged that Johnson had paid for at least some of this esteem in the currency of stolen ideas. Most readers will be aware in this connection that Sherbo's attitude toward Johnson has been somewhat ambivalent. No man could have done more, perhaps, to give a full account of Johnson's Shakespearean labors or to make his Notes available in their entirety to the modern reader.[30] On the other hand, it is certain that no serious modern scholar has advanced more damaging accusations against Johnson's character. It should not be inferred, of course, that Sherbo's primary intention in Samuel Johnson, Editor of Shakespeare is to prove Johnson a plagiarist. On the contrary, he tells us that his aim is to demonstrate that additional knowledge and insight into Johnson

"as critic and editor -- and man" can be derived from a careful study of the Notes.[31] Indeed, he contends that Johnson's modern reputation has become distorted because such prominent writers as F. R. Leavis, J. W. H. Atkins, and M. H. Abrams have attempted to assess the Shakespeare criticism on the basis of the Preface alone.[32]

But Sherbo also insists that, prior to undertaking a study of the criticism in the Notes, we must face up to what he believes to be the fact of Johnson's extensive plagiarism. More specifically, he warns us that, when we follow D. Nichol Smith's advice and turn to Johnson for clarification of a difficult passage in Shakespeare, we may not be turning to Johnson at all but rather to one of Johnson's contemporaries or predecessors:

> Simple forgetfulness on Johnson's part does not provide a satisfactory answer [to the problem of unacknowledged borrowings]. . . . the number of . . . borrowed notes and emendations is too great. When this bald assertion is documented it will no longer be enough to ask, with D. Nichol Smith, "when baffled by a difficult passage, 'What does Johnson say?'": one must ask further, "Did Johnson say this, or is he paraphrasing the comment of another critic?"[33]

It should be made clear that Sherbo does not confine his charge of plagiarism to the Notes. Although he acknowledges that it is now generally admitted that Johnson had little to say in the Preface that was new, he nevertheless contends that it is still not sufficiently recognized how heavily Johnson leaned on ideas in general currency and, more to Sherbo's point,

on the ideas of previous commentators. He insists that there are, in the Preface, "verbal echoes" and agreements, "even to minor details," which have not been given the "full exposition" which they deserve.[34] Sherbo concedes, however, that the Preface is nonetheless "a magnificent restatement of the eighteenth century's thinking on Shakespeare" and that perhaps "Johnson's superior command of language enabled him to say more strikingly and more memorably what his predecessors had said before him."[35]

Sherbo's argument on this point raises an interesting question. Although we can scarcely pursue the matter, it is intriguing to speculate on the possibility that he is simply reading sinister implications in the same sort of evidence which led T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis to celebrate Johnson as an unparalleled example of a critic at work within a positive literary tradition. It seems reasonable to expect that such a critic would not only participate in many of the basic assumptions of his colleagues and predecessors but, in an essay such as the Preface to Shakespeare, share at least some of their language and minor details as well. In this connection, M. R. Ridley has suggested that, in his insistence that the Preface is a derivative document, Sherbo does no more than "show us what we knew already, that Johnson was in many ways a man of his age."[36]

In any event, Sherbo is primarily concerned with the Notes, and, fortunately for his thesis, a sufficient number of these survive his rigorous preliminary investigation to serve as a basis for a study which includes a

valuable discussion of Johnson's critical vocabulary as well as an appreciative estimate both of Johnson's sensitivity to Shakespeare's language and Johnson's insight into the motivation of Shakespeare's characters.[37] Interestingly, Sherbo singles out for special praise a note in which he believes both facets of Johnson's critical expertise to be at work simultaneously. Commenting on Macbeth's reference to Duncan's "silver skin laced with . . . blood," Johnson condemned the image but praised its dramatic propriety: "It is not improbable, that Shakespeare put these forced and unnatural metaphors into the mouth of Macbeth as a mark of artifice and dissimulation, to show the difference between the studied language of hypocrisy, and the natural outcries of sudden passion." This, Sherbo tells us, is Johnson at his best, and it is worth noting that he seems to be in exact agreement with D. Nichol Smith that Johnson's forte as a critic of Shakespeare lay in his ability to infer with convincing skill what a given character was apt to do and say under a given set of circumstances.[38]

Yet for our purposes Sherbo's preliminary discussion is more important than his generally favorable final estimate of Johnson's criticism, for, as we have seen, Sherbo insists in his early chapters that Johnson's alleged plagiarism compels us to undertake nothing less than a full-scale revaluation of his standing as a critic of Shakespeare:

> Future evaluations of Johnson as editor and critic of Shakespeare must be based on what can be demonstrated to be undeniably his own work and not that of

> his predecessors. Existing opinions must be revised, and certain judgments on his merit as a writer of notes, paraphraser of difficult passages, and definer of words must be modified. The evidence here presented makes it clear that Johnson's edition should be approached with some caution.[39]

It will be recalled, perhaps, that Sherbo's charges did not go unchallenged. Arthur M. Eastman, for example, contended with some heat that Sherbo had, on the basis of what Eastman considered insufficient evidence and "strained" reasoning, attempted to do more than call for a reassessment of Johnson's reputation as a critic of Shakespeare. Eastman clearly believes that Sherbo's primary purpose was to represent Johnson as a thief and liar:

> If we accept Professor Sherbo's argument, we see in Johnson an eighteenth-century Iago, an impudent scoundrel who robs his victim, then blackens his reputation, all the while wearing a mask of judicious innocence contemptuous of human meanness. This is not an image the best minds of Johnson's century would have recognized nor is it the image history has come to know, but it is the image to which Professor Sherbo's charge leads us.[40]

It must be recognized that Sherbo responded to Eastman's criticism in a manner which seems curiously at variance with the tone and evident purpose of his discussion in Samuel Johnson, Editor of Shakespeare. Although he continues to argue in his reply to Eastman that we must revise "our picture of Johnson" on the basis of the evidence presented in his study, Sherbo nevertheless contends that he is an admirer of Johnson who differs from

other scholars only to the extent (not the fact) of Johnson's unacknowledged borrowings. In short, he apparently desires to have it both ways. He requires his readers not only to recognize that Johnson plagiarized extensively but to revise their opinion of Johnson accordingly. At the same time, however, he apparently does not wish to acknowledge that he has impugned Johnson's integrity. In any event, he specifically labels Johnson's alleged plagiarism a "misdemeanor" and seems perplexed by the vigor of Eastman's remarks:

> I still admire Johnson greatly even if I am right and he did plagiarize from Heath. I don't think he's an Iago, and I'm truly surprised that Professor Eastman should feel that my examination of the evidence makes him one. What is more, I'm further surprised that Johnsonians and Shakespearians should feel it necessary to rally to Johnson's defense. . . . I'm not trying to be an iconoclast; I'm simply giving my interpretation of the facts as I see them.[41]

It seems safe to assume that most modern readers tend to regard plagiarism as something more serious than a misdemeanor, however, and the question we need to consider is, obviously, what effect Sherbo's allegations have had on Johnson's reputation. The answer seems to be that, in the decade since their publication, these allegations have had little or no effect that is reflected in print. In this connection, Roger McCutcheon's casual response to Sherbo's charges may be even more significant than Arthur M. Eastman's indignant rebuttal. Writing in 1961, McCutcheon

simply shrugs off the question of plagiarism. Noting that Sherbo's book "is, on the whole, a very good one," McCutcheon continues in a manner which any of his former students would recognize as characteristic:

> The facts presented indicate that Johnson's originality as an editor and commentator was not very great. Even the Preface must now be described as a magnificent restatement of the eighteenth-century position on Shakespeare, striking and memorable, but not original.[42]

But McCutcheon apparently does not deem it necessary to defend Johnson's character. Instead, he criticizes Sherbo for failing to give sufficient credit to Johnson's achievement as an interpreter of Shakespeare:

> What Sherbo does not give us is a satisfactory account of the explications. Many lovers of Johnson's Shakespeare admire it more for the exegetical materials than for any other part. In my opinion, Johnson's exegesis has been approached by only one later editor, George Lyman Kittredge.[43]

On the whole, then, we can say that, for the time being at least, Johnson has successfully weathered Arthur Sherbo's charges and continues to stand high among the great critics of Shakespeare. This is not to say, of course, that Johnson's Shakespeare criticism is universally admired in our day or even that it is widely admired without serious qualifications. Even so friendly a critic as M. H. Abrams reminds us that allowances will always have to be made for a critic who "[made] Shakespeare out to be, stylistically, perhaps, the most fallible genius ever to hold a pen."[44] More damaging still is the judgment of another friendly critic, F. R. Leavis.

Although he believes Johnson to be well-nigh infallible on Augustan poetry, Leavis contends that, in failing to exalt the tragedies and in dealing with his subject throughout as merely "a great novelist who writes in dramatic form," Johnson provides us with an appreciation of Shakespeare which is "calamitously defective":

> To use the time-honored phrase, [Johnson] values Shakespeare -- and extols him in admirably characteristic terms -- for his "knowledge of the human heart"; and the Preface to Shakespeare should be a locus classicus for the insufficiency of an appreciation of Shakespeare's "knowledge of the human heart" that is not at the same time an appreciation of the poetry.[45]

Yet if we can point to important modern critics who believe that Shakespeare's achievement lay beyond Johnson's grasp, we are hard-pressed to find one who follows the nineteenth century consensus in damning Johnson's Shakespeare criticism in toto as an exercise in stubborn perversity.[46] Moreover, we can detect an occasional soft spot in the opposition of even Johnson's severest modern critics. William K. Wimsatt, for example, has edited a selection of Johnson's Shakespeare criticism and defended this act with an argument which is at least implicit in his discussion of Johnson in Literary Criticism, A Short History. He suggests that, while Johnson's observations on Shakespeare must not be assumed to rest on valid critical principles, they nevertheless are stimulating and somehow valuable. Wimsatt's remarks in this connection are also interesting to us because his

point of view represents such a far cry from that of the Edwardian reviewer cited early in this chapter. The reviewer, it will be recalled, believed that, in criticizing Shakespeare, Johnson had been brought up for judgment before a superior power. Wimsatt, on the other hand, sees Johnson's Shakespeare criticism as an enlightening confrontation of equals:

> . . . certain motions of Johnson's spirit . . . may be conceived as not entirely subdued to the schemes of his critical reasoning. One difference between Johnson and most other literary critics, and especially between him and many other critics of his own time, is the fullness and depth with which he responds to a work of literature and to the author of that work. Johnson responds with a massive movement of his personality. Sometimes this works to inform and illuminate a critical judgment, as in the intuition . . . that Shakespeare's "mingled drama" is an artistically right exhibition of the "real state of sublunary nature." At other times, we are likely to feel that a statement of Johnson's is not so much an act of theoretical intelligence as a direct confrontation of one personality with another. The more massive this other personality, and the more opposite to Johnson's, the more memorable the statement. . . .[47]

To conclude, then, we can say that Johnson's present-day influence as a critic of Shakespeare is rather widespread. His Preface has been consistently admired in our time not only as a document of enduring intrinsic value but also as the cornerstone of Shakespeare's modern reputation. Similarly, his Notes have not only been widely praised, but, what is surely more important, widely adopted by Shakespeare's modern editors. Finally, an impressive body of modern critical opinion regards Johnson as the fore-

most authority on that aspect of Shakespeare's art which Joseph Wood Krutch seems totally justified in designating as the one which the majority of readers will always value most, the poet's "power to represent what the reader recognizes as a true picture of human nature and human life." Accordingly, despite the important reservations noted, we can say that the foregoing discussion demonstrates the validity of Helen Gardner's recent estimate that Johnson is, "if not the greatest at least one of the two or three greatest of English critics of Shakespeare."[48] Surely Miss Gardner's judgment is one which Johnson's most ardent supporters are apt to find satisfactory and, at the same time, one which even his severest detractors would probably allow.

But one additional word needs to be said on the subject of Johnson's modern reputation as a critic of Shakespeare, a word which relates to Joseph Wood Krutch's judgment that, in the first four decades of the twentieth century, Johnson the critic seemed to stand somewhat higher among commentators on Shakespeare than he did in the world of letters generally. Obviously, if our study of Johnson's reputation as a critic between his day and our own were confined to the Shakespeare criticism, we would be compelled to admit that the conventional modern view, as outlined in Chapter One, is almost exactly true to the facts. Although the Shakespeare criticism was not totally ignored or condemned, it nevertheless did lose ground drastically after 1825, far more drastically than did the criticism in The

Lives of the Poets. Moreover, it seems probable that the Shakespeare criticism lost ground precisely because of the attacks of Coleridge and his followers. Similarly, the twentieth century revival of the Shakespeare criticism plainly does begin with D. Nichol Smith and Sir Walter Raleigh, critics who doubtless fostered the generally friendly attitude which we find in later writers on Johnson's Shakespearean labors. Moreover, Joseph Wood Krutch -- inevitably, perhaps, granted the chronological organization of his book -- scores his most telling points in defense of Johnson's criticism in his chapter on the edition of Shakespeare. Finally, it seems probable that, all things considered, Johnson's influence is stronger today in Shakespeare criticism than in any other single area of modern letters. Yet as we have seen, to equate Johnson's total reputation over the years with his reputation as a critic of Shakespeare is to adopt a view which is necessarily partial and distorted. The criticism in the Lives of the Poets was not forgotten during the nineteenth century -- indeed, that criticism appears to have accrued an impressive following in the last decades of that century and the first decade of the twentieth, a following which seems to have been falling away during the same years in which Sir Walter Raleigh was publishing his Johnson on Shakespeare and Six Essays on Johnson. Therefore, despite the modest gains among writers on Shakespeare which Krutch detected in 1944, we must conclude that Johnson the critic suffered a pro-

nounced net loss in prestige after 1910. At the same time, however, we should recognize that the Shakespeare criticism does provide an unmistakable thread of continuity between Johnson's nineteenth and twentieth century reputations.

The question of Johnson's present-day standing as a critic of Milton can be dealt with somewhat more succinctly, for, as all will be aware, Johnson is not widely regarded today as one of Milton's most useful interpreters. Indeed, it is generally true that, over the past twenty-five years, scholarship has tended to find the Life of Milton more interesting for what it tells us about Johnson than for what it tells us about his subject. It is true, nevertheless, that we have continued to pay a significant amount of attention to two subsidiary questions which seem to have survived intact from the nineteenth century: first, does Johnson's Milton criticism have its roots in principle or prejudice, and, secondly, is it possible to place our complete trust in a critic who thinks Lycidas a bad poem? On the first point, we encountered earlier in this study at least a few nineteenth century writers who argued that, despite his notable lack of sensitivity to Milton's music and his unmistakable animosity toward Milton the man, Johnson the critic dealt with Milton's poetry with exemplary objectivity. But it seems clear that the majority of nineteenth century commentators were convinced that Johnson had conducted nothing less than a personal vendetta against Milton, and, as is widely known, many of them responded

to the Life of Milton with something approaching ferocity.[49]

The belief that Johnson's Milton criticism is colored by prejudice continues to be widely held in our day -- particularly by professional Milton scholars[50] -- and it must be recognized that T. S. Eliot did not help matters any when, in 1947, he not only recognized Johnson's prejudices against Milton but strongly implied that those prejudices could scarcely be avoided by any decent, right-minded human being:

> There is one prejudice against Milton, apparent on almost every page of Johnson's Life of Milton, which I imagine is still general: we, however, with a longer historical perspective, are in a better position than was Johnson to recognize it and to make allowance for it. This is a prejudice which I share myself: an antipathy towards Milton the man.[51]

The response of Marjorie Hope Nicolson to this statement might have been cited earlier as unfriendly testimony in support of the notion that Johnson has been a strong influence on Eliot. Miss Nicolson, who believes that "Johnson's shadow seems still to dim the eyes of various modern critics," appears to be convinced that that shadow is nowhere more evident than in Eliot's attitude toward Milton. Concerning the lecture in which Eliot made the remarks just quoted, she writes: "It was no surprise to many of us who listened to the so-called 'recantation' address on Milton that T. S. Eliot should have begun with the words, 'Samuel Johnson . . . said. . . .'"[52]

To be sure, modern commentators have continued to insist that the

idea that the Milton criticism is warped by personal bias is simply not compatible with the degree of praise which Johnson bestows on Paradise Lost. But such efforts tend to be blunted by the fact that, for almost two centuries, critics have cited Johnson's complaints about Paradise Lost as conclusive evidence of a warped reading of the poem. As Joseph Wood Krutch points out, the problem clearly stems from the fact that

> the pros and cons of Johnson's judgments upon Paradise Lost are so difficult to reconcile that he is open to the charge of mere inconsistency: of having said in one paragraph what cannot possibly be true unless what is said in another be false.[53]

In this connection, D. M. Hill has recently offered an interesting explanation of Johnson's seeming ambivalence toward Paradise Lost. Hill acknowledges that it is simply impossible to tell what Johnson thought of the poem by reproducing any single quotation from the Life of Milton and goes on to argue that Johnson

> followed the method of the scholastic disputation, arguing at one point wholeheartedly in favour of it, and at another point wholeheartedly against it. The key to this piece of criticism is to see Johnson in the position of moderator considering both sides of the argument in order to reach his judgement.[54]

The difficulty, Hill tells us, arises because "It is a fact that in aesthetic judgements one sometimes cannot reach a definite or precise conclusion." Hill believes that Johnson found himself in precisely that predicament in

evaluating Paradise Lost, and that, as a consequence, he simply neglected to conclude his disputation with a summing up. Hence the reader is left with the responsibility of choosing between two radically different interpretations:

> The fact is that by adding up all that Johnson has to say in favour of Paradise Lost, one is left with a perfect poem. By adding up all that he has to say against Paradise Lost, one is left with an appalling poem. The beauties and defects, when taken together, add up to much more than one poem: they provide sufficient material to make two, one good, one bad. And the tone of the treatment is not impartial. While assessing the merits, Johnson is often the warm admirer; while assessing the defects, he is the forthright condemner.[55]

As might be anticipated, Walter Jackson Bate has attempted to resolve this difficulty in terms of what he considers Johnson's unswerving desire to see in literature a reflection of quotidian human experience. Since "The fact remains that 'human interest' is not the principal virtue of Paradise Lost," Bate explains that it was inevitable that Johnson would make comments about the poem which could be "plucked out of context with real or assumed shock." Bate insists therefore that Johnson's negative comments stem not from prejudice but from a laudable fidelity to his own principles, and that

> we [should] find them reassuring to frail human nature when we remember that Johnson also wrote the first great critique of the poem; that he at once puts his finger on what is most distinctive -- its sublimity and power.[56]

In a similar vein, Paul Fussell has pointed out that the controversy

surrounding the Life of Milton has obscured the fact that, what Johnson admired in Paradise Lost, he admired with uncharacteristic lack of moderation. Of Johnson's response to the "anti-scientific colloquy between Raphael and Adam," Fussell says:

> It would be hard to find an occasion where Johnson . . . paid higher praise to anything merely human. . . . Johnson's rare hyperboles and absolutes here . . . are almost shocking. And they become the more startling when we recall Johnson's final estimate of Paradise Lost, which he pronounces "not the greatest of heroic poems, only because it is not the first". It is, in short, second only to the Iliad, and superior to the Odyssey, the Aeneid, and the epics of the Italian Renaissance.[57]

It is not suggested, of course, that all twentieth century discussions of Johnson's treatment of Paradise Lost fall out on the negative or on the defensive side. Helen Darbishire, for example, has insisted that "nothing better has been said of Milton" than what Johnson said about Paradise Lost: "Johnson's criticism is the best way-in to what matters most in Paradise Lost when we come to estimate its lasting poetic value."[58] But on the whole, it seems fair to say that Johnson's criticism of Paradise Lost continues to generate as much suspicion as esteem for its author, and to foster rather than mitigate the long-standing charge that he is a biased critic of Milton.

In turning to the critique of Lycidas, perhaps the most notorious judgment ever made by a literary critic, we must recognize that here Johnson stands charged not merely with prejudice but also with stark insensi-

bility. Indeed, J. W. H. Atkins probably does not overstate the case when he says that Johnson's "apparently insensate" strictures on Lycidas have come to be widely accepted as "an outburst of political spleen and as the nadir of critical perversity."[59] Although modern discussions of this subject have tended to be more temperate than those of the nineteenth century, it is nevertheless true that the critique of Lycidas continues in our day to give comfort to Johnson's detractors and to embarrass some of his staunchest defenders. The tendency toward moderation in regard to the critique of Lycidas is not, of course, an altogether recent development. As we saw in Chapter Two, John Hepburn Millar argued as early as 1902 that it simply was not logical to damn Johnson's comments on Lycidas on the one hand and to praise his discussion of the metaphysical poets on the other without "[pausing] to inquire whether the ground of both judgments is not identical."[60] But Millar's comments must be recognized as a false start, for he believed that both judgments were grounded in "canons of sincerity," and needless to say the "canons of sincerity" have found few advocates in an age which has tended to be dominated by the concept of the work of art as entity. On the other hand, as we saw in the preceding chapter, René Wellek cites Johnson's critique of Lycidas as conclusive proof of his obtuseness, arguing that Johnson's requirement of sincere grief in Milton "does away with three-quarters of the world's literature and introduces the standard of the individual experience of the author, which is both indeterminable and aesthetically false."[61] Even

Jean Hagstrum is apologetic on this score. The best he can say for Johnson is that he is not inconsistent:

> However much one may be outraged by Johnson's particular application of this principle or even by his original adherence to it, one cannot justly accuse him of inconsistency. For the doctrine of sincerity is, after all, a natural outcome of a psychological theory of poetry which wishes to emphasize and facilitate the communication between the man who creates the poem and the man who reacts to it. It was quite as inevitable that Johnson, Tolstoy, and I. A. Richards, each in his own way, should use the test of sincerity as that T. S. Eliot should reject it.[62]

As we have noted in earlier references to M. H. Abrams, T. S. Eliot, and F. R. Leavis, Johnson's complaints about the language of Lycidas have been received with greater forebearance in our day than have his complaints about Milton's lack of sincerity. But here again it should be noted that the position of Abrams, Eliot, and Leavis does not differ radically from that taken much earlier by Sir Leslie Stephen, who argued that

> [Johnson's] criticism has always a meaning, and in the case of works belonging to his own school a very sound meaning. When he is speaking of other poetry, we can only reply that his remarks may be true, but that they are not to the purpose.[63]

All four writers seem at one in the opinion that Johnson's training simply did not relate to Milton's style. In fact, Leavis suggests that it is no mean tribute to the power of Paradise Lost that Johnson did not reject that poem on the basis of his inevitable aversion to Milton's use of language:

> The critic reports the resistance and the favorable judgment together, giving more space to the resistance, by way of bringing out the power of Milton's genius. Johnson's very positive training (for that is what the taste, or "ear," of so disciplined a critic represents) impels him to ask for something that Milton doesn't offer, and he feels the impulsion even while acclaiming what Milton gives.[64]

But Leavis believes that there was nothing in Lycidas to override Johnson's "trained hearkening for another music," and that, while the resulting adverse judgment "may be a limitation in him, [it] is certainly of the essence of his strength."[65] Leavis' conclusion, "that [Johnson's] approach is inappropriate and the poem a different kind of thing from any appreciable by Johnsonian criticism," is clearly shared by Eliot.[66] Like Leavis, Eliot finds Johnson's ideas on Milton's style rather congenial, going so far in this regard as to argue that, unless we can agree with Johnson's criticism of Milton's language, we cannot appreciate the uniqueness of Milton's great achievement as a poet.[67] But he agrees that Johnson's estimate of Lycidas is an erroneous judgment which is to be explained "by the specialization, rather than the absence, of his sense of rhythm."[68]

Probably the most important modern discussion of Johnson's attitude toward Lycidas, one which goes a long way toward documenting the position of Abrams, Leavis, and Eliot, is Warren Fleischauer's "Johnson, Lycidas, and the Norms of Criticism." In addition to representing a comprehensive and well-documented argument in support of the proposition that Johnson's

"strictures on [Lycidas] are based on norms to which he appeals, time and again, throughout his criticism,"[69] Fleischauer also set out to refute several long-standing commonplaces concerning Johnson's attitude toward the pastoral and toward versification in general. In the first place, Fleischauer points to Ramblers 36 and 37 and to the Dictionary definition of "pastoral" to prove that Johnson had no innate hatred of the pastoral genre per se. But Fleischauer argues that, for Johnson, the pastoral "was exemplified by Theocritus, and by Theocritus alone."[70] As he sees it, Johnson assumed that the subject matter available to the pastoral writer was of necessity largely exhausted by its earliest practitioner, and he was therefore inclined to believe that subsequent pastoral writers had tended to imitate their predecessors rather than rural life, and that, in the process, they had allowed extraneous matters (e. g. philosophy, theology, politics) to creep into their poems. In short, Fleischauer explains,

> [Johnson] knew that the longer the pastoral tradition in poetry had endured, the more artificial it had become. With each stage of its transmission, it was a further step from Theocritan reality; and imitation, begot incestuously upon imitation, had only raised pastoral decadence to a higher power.[71]

In any case, Fleischauer points out that Johnson nowhere identifies Lycidas as a pastoral; he says only that "the 'form' of Lycidas is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting." Fleischauer explains that Johnson's complaint is simply that Milton's use of pastoral machinery

must be recognized as symptomatic of a rather advanced state of poetic anemia. But the notion that Johnson rejected Lycidas out of hand because it was a pastoral is not valid, Fleischauer insists, despite the fact that "it is still widely assumed in some of the highest Johnsonian scholarly circles that Johnson could abide no pastorals whatsoever."[72]

To refute the equally venerable notion that Johnson had been stone deaf to Milton's music, Fleischauer refers his reader to Johnson's description of Milton as "master of his language in its full extent; and [as having] selected the melodious words with such diligence that from his book alone the Art of English Poetry might be learned." Fleischauer then sets out to reconcile this opinion with the almost universally condemned judgment that Lycidas suffers from harsh diction. In Fleischauer's view, the uproar on this point stems from the unwillingness or inability of nineteenth and twentieth century critics to understand what Johnson meant by the terms "harsh" and "diction." As he explains it, "harsh" would include for Johnson "anything unduly labored or strained, either stylistically or intellectually." If we accept this definition of "harsh" and recognize that, in "diction," Johnson included everything that we identify with "style," Fleischauer insists that we must acknowledge that Johnson was simply being true to his principles in complaining of harsh diction in Lycidas.[73] By way of helpful contrast, Fleischauer refers us to Idler 77 for what he believes to be "The best statement anywhere of Johnson's norm for poetic diction." Fleischauer is convinced

that, in this essay, Johnson describes a style which is exactly the opposite of "harsh":

> The discriminating character of ease appears principally in the diction; for all true poetry suffers by harsh or daring figures, by transposition, by unusual acceptations of words, and by any license which would be avoided by a writer of prose. Where any artifice appears in the construction of the verse, that verse is no longer easy.[74]

But there was still a more serious level of principle on which Johnson was compelled to reject Lycidas, Fleischauer explains, a level where Johnson's most profoundly-held religious and critical beliefs can be seen to combine:

> Too stern a Churchman to confound a seventeenth-century Independent with an Old Testament prophet or with the Second Person of the Trinity, he was also too orthodox a Christian to look upon Lycidas as an extension of the Gospel. He would not rob Peter to pay Apollo. He did not, would not, could not confuse the poetical experience with the religious. Here Johnson's critical norm is most emphatic because, not only is it the corollary of the principle that art is, in the Aristotelian sense, imitative of nature, not of the supernatural, but it is at one with his religious dogma.[75]

All in all, then, Fleischauer can be said to offer a convincing argument for the case that, in this most controversial of all his judgments, "Johnson was true to his norms, and therefore not false to Lycidas."[76]

But it is to be noted that Fleischauer stops somewhat short of saying that Lycidas is a bad poem for exactly the reasons that Johnson proposes, and,

valuable as his essay is, it does not mitigate the fact that some of Johnson's most prominent modern supporters -- men who are, after all, no strangers to Johnson's critical norms -- have clearly believed that, principles or no principles, Johnson ought to have liked Milton's poem better than he did. Joseph Wood Krutch, for example, considers the estimate of Lycidas to be Johnson's one great boner as a critic. Although Krutch concedes that Johnson's strictures "would probably be adequate as a criticism of any translation of the poem into a foreign language," he insists that

> to most people, even to most of those not especially qualified to judge either Milton or poetry, the lines themselves confute the arguments against them and prove Johnson wrong, even though they may not make it clear how one who seems so sensible can be.[77]

As was noted above, Jean Hagstrum is likewise apologetic concerning Johnson's criticism of Lycidas. He attributes this judgment to a "critical dogma [from which] Johnson could never fully liberate himself," namely the notion that what is familiar in a poem must pertain to the sentiment, what is new to the language.[78] Walter Jackson Bate does not argue the point. He dismisses the judgment of Lycidas as "merely one of [Johnson's] few quaint misfires," and lets the matter rest.[79] Surely it must be recognized as an eloquent tribute to the appeal of Milton's great poem that such ardently pro-Johnson writers as Krutch, Hagstrum, and Bate have explained Johnson's rejection of Lycidas as an aberration rather than as a clear-cut case of conflicting ideas about poetry.

But on the whole, we can say that there has been in our time a distinct trend toward the opposite point of view, toward the position that Johnson's criticism and Milton's poetry simply do not relate sufficiently to judge either by the criteria of the other. As W. R. Keast has suggested, this change in attitude can be explained in part by the general metamorphosis in literary taste over the last hundred years. In Keast's opinion, the Lives of Milton and Gray had an almost symbolic significance for most nineteenth century critics: ". . . it was . . . Johnson's supposed sins against taste and judgment in these . . . that made his critics storm and his defenders seek cover."[80] But in our day, Keast points out, it is the Life of Cowley which tends to grate on an exposed nerve, whereas the Lives of Milton and Gray have simply ceased to generate significant controversy. Accordingly, despite Helen Darbishire's insistence that it is Johnson who shows us the right way-in to Paradise Lost, it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that Johnson's present-day reputation is much enhanced by the Life of Milton. At the same time, however, we should recognize that Johnson continues to exert a negative influence in Milton criticism. Indeed, it seems likely that the Life of Milton will always provide Milton scholars with a convenient anvil on which to hammer out new judgments.[81]

In turning to the Life of Cowley, we are, needless to say, scarcely undertaking a consideration of Johnson's influence in the modern reputation of that poet.[82] But we clearly are taking up two questions which are perhaps

as important as any dealt with in this study: first, the question of Johnson's influence on the modern revival of Donne and his school, and, secondly, the question of his relation to the twentieth century school of criticism which has been so concerned with the philosophical basis of metaphysical poetry, the New Critics.

Taking up the second question first, we will recall from our discussion in the preceding chapter that Johnson does not rank high in the histories of criticism which have been written from the New Critics' point of view. Because Johnson did not embrace the concept of functional metaphor, William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, in Literary Criticism, A Short History, have dealt with him as a museum piece having no relevance to valid modern criticism. But granted their preoccupation with metaphysical poetry, the New Critics have nevertheless been compelled to come to terms with Johnson's discussion of the subject in the Life of Cowley, and the point to be stressed is that none of them has rejected Johnson's definition of metaphysical wit. Quite to the contrary, Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate have generously acknowledged themselves to be indebted to Johnson's analysis.

To be sure, some doubt has been raised as to whether the term "metaphysical poetry" is really interchangeable between the Life of Cowley on the one hand and the discussions of the New Critics on the other. Specifically, R. S. Crane has cited John Crowe Ransom's discussion of metaphysical poetry in The World's Body as a prime example of the danger in-

herent in assuming that a key phrase invariably carries the same meaning in all critical discussions:

> In spite of the fact that Mr. Ransom writes in full awareness of Johnson's use of the term and that both critics refer to some of the same seventeenth-century poets, the real object of discussion in the two is only nominally identical, the object envisioned by Johnson being a historically determinate "race" of poets in the generation before Dryden, to whom he attributes certain excesses and defects in the light of his general criteria for poetry of any kind, whereas the object of concern for Mr. Ransom, as constituted in the terms of his essay, is strictly not a particular school of poets at all but a universal kind of poetry, the nature of which is determined, in his definition, by the opposition he establishes between it and the two contrasting extremes of "physical poetry" on the one hand and "Platonic poetry" on the other. One term, again, but two subject-matters that overlap at no essential point; and though we may prefer, with Mr. Ransom, to use the name "metaphysical poetry" in a more honorific sense than it has in Johnson, we must not allow ourselves to suppose that we are honouring the same thing.[83]

But it must be recognized that Cleanth Brooks has never seemed to doubt for a moment that he and Johnson are dealing with the same phenomena in their discussions of metaphysical poetry. Indeed, Brooks goes beyond Eliot in conceding Johnson a full understanding of what the metaphysical poets were up to. Eliot, it will be recalled, granted only that "Johnson has hit, perhaps by accident, on one of their peculiarities" in observing that the attempts of the metaphysicals were "always analytic."[84] In Modern Poetry and the Tradition, however, Brooks credits Johnson with

more than a partial and accidental insight into their activities:

> In beginning this exploration [of metaphysical poetry], we may well take our start from Dr. Johnson's famous phrase, "heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together." Johnson has here seized upon the core of the method. It was a method, needless to say, of which he heartily disapproved -- hence the "yoked by violence."[85]

Yet in his later study, The Well Wrought Urn, Brooks admits to sharing at least some of Johnson's disapproval -- specifically, his disapproval of the metaphysical poets' unswerving desire "to impress their audience with their cleverness":

> All of us are familiar with [this] censure passed upon Donne and his followers by Dr. Johnson, and a great many of us still retain it as our own, softening only the rigor of it and the thoroughness of its application, but not giving it up as a principle.[86]

As far as Marjorie Hope Nicolson is concerned, this statement constitutes proof positive that Brooks is to be numbered among those modern critics whose eyes are dimmed by Johnson's shadow. Indeed, she implies that Brooks is something of a back-slider on Donne, one of those "who, going out with the ebbing tide of enthusiasm, now speak critically of the former idol."[87] But one does not have to accept Miss Nicolson's opinion concerning Johnsonian influence here to recognize that, in practice, there is often a more cordial relationship between Johnson and Brooks than might be anticipated from a reading of Literary Criticism, A Short History. Brooks him-

self explains his somewhat ambivalent attitude toward Johnson in The Well Wrought Urn, noting that "though [Johnson's criticism] can be extremely useful as a tool for exploration, it is hardly a criticism to rest in."[88] Accordingly, it is to be expected that Johnson will fare poorly in Literary Criticism, A Short History, a study in which Wimsatt and Brooks strive mightily to formulate a criticism that can be rested in. At the same time, however, it is not surprising that Johnson often turns up as a useful navigational aid when Brooks is exploring the field. In this connection, one need look no further than Brooks' discussion of "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" in The Well Wrought Urn to be convinced that, like many another modern critic, Brooks on occasion finds Johnson to be a valuable and congenial point of reference.[89]

Perhaps the most enlightening discussion of the Life of Cowley by a New Critic is Allen Tate's essay on "Johnson on the Metaphysical Poets," an essay which inevitably calls to mind John Bard McNulty's complaint about what he considers the unfortunate disparity between Johnson's positiveness and the groping uncertainty of modern criticism. Certainly there is a striking contrast between Johnson's customary manner and Tate's manner in this essay, for Tate acknowledges that he does not know quite where his essay begins or exactly where it ends. Indeed, he frankly admits at one point that he does not understand what he has just written.[90] Moreover, he denies that he is competent to judge Johnson's criticism as a whole or his treatment of the metaphysical poets in particular. Instead, he limits his intention as

follows: "I shall try to investigate a contrast, very broadly conceived, in the use of figurative language, with Johnson on one side and the Metaphysical style on the other."[91] In making this contrast, however, Tate throws a good deal of light on the relationship between Johnson and the New Criticism.

To begin with, Tate clearly accepts Eliot's and Leavis' conception of Johnson as a critic at work within a positive tradition. But he goes beyond them in stressing the opinion that Johnson's positive tradition could not cope with the most meaningful poetry. He explains in this connection that "the neo-classical age was an interlude between modernisms, [an age which] had by-passed the Renaissance Nature of depth and restored the classical Nature of surface."[92] Therefore, although one of the major points he wishes to stress is "the essential accuracy of one of the great critical insights," namely Johnson's use of "the astonishing metaphor of sound, discordia concors," to define metaphysical wit, Tate nevertheless plainly deplores Johnson's failure to embrace the concept of metaphor which he had been shrewd enough to perceive. More specifically, he criticizes Johnson for refusing to admit that analytic attempts of the metaphysical poets had served any profoundly useful purpose. Tate interprets Johnson's skepticism on this point as part of

> a defect that seems general in that age, when men assumed a static relation between the mind and its object, between poet and subject. The universals

> that have not escaped former observation are . . . the big tenors which must not be limited by too many exceptions in the vehicles: invention is all very well if the poet doesn't mean it too hard; if he does it will not win rational admiration for the "minute particulars" in which Blake saw the life not only of poetry but of the spirit. We can scarcely blame Johnson if in describing what poetry ought to be he described the weak side of Pope's and his own.[93]

As Tate sees it, then, Johnson's ideas of what poetry ought to be add up "to a denial of validity to what in our age has been called a poetry of experience," a poetry which is liberated from any mere spatial frame of reference. Such poetry is to be found from Shakespeare to Donne, Tate explains, and perhaps in Dryden as well, but drops out of sight thereafter until "the Prelude brought us back: to the breakup of the solid object in the dynamic stream of time":

> The breaking up of the image, of which [Johnson] accuses the Metaphysical poets, is the discovery of a dynamic relation between the mind and its objects, in a poetry which does not recognize the traditional topic; the subject becomes the metaphorical structure, it is no longer the set theme. The ideas that result from the dynamic perception of objects (language itself is thus an object) are in constant disintegration; so inferentially are the objects themselves. The "object" which poetry like "The Extasie" or "The Canonization" suggests that we locate, is not an existence in space, but an essence created by the junction of the vehicle and tenor of the leading metaphor. It is not in space; it moves with experience in time.[94]

Here it should be emphasized that Tate's one real point of certainty -- indeed, the only point he makes which is neither tentative nor apologetic --

is his conviction that, in fusing the vehicle and tenor of metaphor, the poet achieves a heightened reality which can be arrived at in no other way. It is this conviction, needless to say, which places Tate and his colleagues at such a distant remove from Johnson. At the risk of oversimplifying what is, after all, a very complex position and without suggesting for a moment that the New Critics are in exact agreement with one another on every issue, it can be said that a point of departure for all of them is a basic dissatisfaction with what they consider the inability of modern science to monitor the most meaningful frequencies of existence. As a result of modern man's growing dependence on a purely scientific view of life, John Crowe Ransom, for example, believes that "the body and solid substance of the world . . . seems to have retired into the fulness of memory." In Ransom's view, the solid substance of the world is simply beyond the grasp of science, which he holds to be "only the cognitive department of our animal life, [one by which] we know the world only as a scheme of abstract conveniences."[95] For Ransom as for all the New Critics, metaphor is the only means through which modern man can recapture the fulness of experience, and it need hardly be said that Tate holds to this view of metaphor in the essay under consideration here. But if Eliot and Leavis are correct in their view of Johnson as a critic who was unselfconsciously involved in a positive tradition, a tradition in which, as Leavis explains it, he could assume that "the ideas he wants to express are adequately provided for . . . in the common currency

of terms, put together according to the conventions of grammar and logic," then it is not to be expected that he would feel any great need to inquire beyond it, or to be overly sympathetic toward the efforts of the metaphysical poets to rearrange it metaphorically.[96]

As noted above, Tate clearly believes that Eliot and Leavis are right about Johnson's relation to his milieu, and a useful contrast can be made here between Eliot and Leavis on the one hand and the New Critics on the other. It will be recognized that all these critics would probably agree that the ultimate reach of poetry lay somewhere beyond the grasp of Johnson's positive tradition. But Eliot and Leavis insist that, if it embodied limitations, Johnson's coherent culture also provided distinct advantages, namely a solid frame of reference within which he could practice a criticism which was, in Eliot's view, purely literary. But the New Critics have not been notably hospitable toward the idea of poetry or criticism as an outgrowth of culture or tradition. Instead, they have placed their complete faith in the concept of autonomous metaphor. But it is interesting to note that, in the essay we have just been looking at, Tate uneasily concedes that, for all its theoretical autonomy, modern poetry may, in practice, suffer for lack of solid cultural roots. Indeed, he suggests that much of this poetry may have achieved the precarious objective existence of a free balloon:

> That the poets may have cracked the atom before the physicists gives us the dubious pride of discovery; but I daresay few persons feel any pride

> in some of the more practical results. The neo-classical age died because it could not move; we may be dying because we cannot stop moving. Our poetry has become process, including its own processes.[97]

The foregoing remarks are not, of course, represented as a comprehensive discussion of the New Criticism. But surely we have been enough to permit us to take a second look at Edward Emley's judgment on the New Critics' relation to Johnson. Writing in 1951, it will be recalled, Emley concluded that the New Critics

> approach Johnson's "Essay on Cowley," [sic] not as criticism to be evaluated, but rather as an unfavorable judgment to be invalidated. And though their exclusive critical canons and their obvious special pleading in behalf of the metaphysical poets constitute in themselves a too narrow aesthetic, nevertheless, their close attention to Johnson's essay suggests that they are forced to consider it the most incisive surviving estimate of these poets.[98]

Surely Emley's statement does not seem to describe the attitude of Brooks and Tate in the discussions we have been considering here. On the contrary, in their all-important discussions of metaphor, Brooks and Tate seem not to be interested in knocking down a judgment which they consider invalid but in finding a comfortable place to stand relative to a judgment which they consider valid indeed. Since they are convinced that Johnson was the first critic to perceive and explain a concept of metaphor which they hold to be supreme, they can scarcely disassociate themselves from him entirely. On the other hand, since Johnson did not exalt that concept of meta-

phor, they can do no more than acknowledge what they judge to be the accuracy of his insight without undermining their own critical position. In any case, it seems clear that, excluding the formal estimate set forth in Literary Criticism, A Short History and Ransom's dour remarks in The World's Body, the New Critics have been more cordial and respectful toward Johnson than Emley's judgment would seem to indicate. As we have seen, W. K. Wimsatt has edited a selection of Johnson's Shakespeare criticism, and, in the important discussions of metaphor which we have just looked at, Brooks and Tate generously concede that they are in his debt.

Yet if the New Critics tend in practice to deal with Johnson somewhat more cordially than we are accustomed to assume, it is nevertheless true that they are responsible for propagating the widely held view that, because he had not been swept off his feet by the Metaphysicals, Johnson had condemned them. As we have seen, Cleanth Brooks states unequivocally that the Metaphysical poets' method was one of which Johnson "heartily disapproved." John Crowe Ransom likewise believes that Johnson's estimate of these poets was entirely negative.[99] René Wellek, a critic whose ideas show a close affinity with those of the New Critics but whose attitude toward Johnson is clearly more severe than the attitudes of Wimsatt, Brooks, and Tate, goes somewhat further. Although he acknowledges that "their imagery or 'wit' is well described by Johnson," Wellek clearly assumes that Johnson simply failed to understand the Metaphysicals. Moreover, he believes that the Life of

Cowley proves not only Johnson's obtuseness but that of his tradition as well:

> The fact that Johnson thought Cowley "undoubtedly the best" of the metaphysicals and that he totally ignored their actual qualities shows the strength of his rationalistic prejudices against anything which seemed to him a special taste, a fashion rather than the assertion of universal truth. One of the most special tastes the world has ever seen -- abstract neoclassicism -- was erected into the only standard of art and poetry.[100]

But during the same years in which Brooks, Ransom, and Wellek were making the foregoing judgments, other scholars were advancing the view that Johnson not only had not condemned the Metaphysical poets but that he had given them an important boost when they needed it most. One of the first to speak up in Johnson's behalf was W. B. C. Watkins, a scholar who will be remembered for demonstrating, in his Johnson and English Poetry before 1660, just how intimately Johnson knew the poetry he discussed in the Life of Cowley.[101] Ten years after the publication of this pioneer study, Watkins wrote again on the subject. The occasion of his comments was Joseph Wood Krutch's assertion in Samuel Johnson that, in matters of the imagination, Johnson had been a follower of Hobbes. Watkins contends to the contrary that Johnson's argument in the Life of Cowley that true wit may be "rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of discordia concors" is alien to anything to be found in Hobbes but very close to Coleridge's view of the imagination as the faculty which "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities."[102]

Moreover, he insists that if Johnson censured the Metaphysical poets in the Life of Cowley he expressed great admiration for them as well. Indeed, in an opinion which stands in startling contrast with that of Wellek, Watkins argues that Johnson knew the Neoclassical tradition to be in decline and saw in the Metaphysical manner a tonic which might revive it. In pursuing this point, Watkins also implies that Johnson laid the groundwork for the modern conception of art as entity:

> In a sense, [Johnson] would like to graft the metaphysical stem on the neo-classical root. Furthermore, he feels it necessary to evolve for the Metaphysicals a rigorously philosophical definition of wit, "abstracted from its effects upon the hearer" (thus quite apart, perhaps, from personal taste and music?), which, ironically, bears revolutionary seeds.[103]

Writing in 1953, David Perkins carries Watkins' point somewhat further. In effect, he argues that in the Life of Cowley Johnson had been an eighteenth century Eliot setting out to heal what he considered a dissociation of wit.[104] In Perkins' opinion, Johnson saw the metaphysical style as the reverse of the Augustan but did not judge either style according to the criteria of the other. Although he believes that, between the two extremes represented, Johnson probably held strength of thought to be more important than decorum of diction, Perkins concludes that what Johnson really argues for in the Life of Cowley is a combination of the two.[105]

For all that, however, Perkins' essay is interesting to us primarily

because of the view he presents of Johnson as the instigator of the Metaphysical revival. He argues that Johnson not only made it his business to study the poetry of the Metaphysicals closely but to evolve "an analytic and critical method for judging them" at a time when they were virtually forgotten.[106] In view of their condition when Johnson took them up, Perkins believes that there is a good bit of irony in the fact that the twentieth century has tended to look upon the author of the Life of Cowley as an implacable enemy of the Metaphysical poets:

> To be sure, his admiration was not complete. It was strong enough, however, to make him the first critic to analyze and define them -- in a sense, even to resurrect and justify them critically. It is an ironic accident of literary history that, in the revival of interest in "metaphysical" poetry after World War I, Johnson's resurrecting and pioneer placing of them should have been regarded as an attack only because the same balanced judgment that made him disregard the fashionable stereotype of his own time, and to try to enlarge the prevailing conception of "wit" and make a place for the "metaphysical" poets, also led him to value other qualities and kinds of poetry.[107]

Other prominent scholars have similarly suggested that Johnson stands at the head of the Metaphysical revival. M. H. Abrams, for example, believes that in the Life of Cowley

> Johnson's concern was to take a once-dominant poetic tradition, which was then at the nadir of its repute, but which continued to hold for him a particular fascination, and to estimate its virtues at the same time that he took due notice of its deficiencies.[108]

Walter Jackson Bate makes more or less the same point, insisting that if Johnson censured the Metaphysical poets he likewise defended them at a time when their reputation was at rock bottom. Moreover, he suggests that Johnson provided the critical approach which has enabled all subsequent generations to understand and appreciate their poetry.[109] Helen Gardner likewise asserts that "The Donne revival begins with Johnson."[110]

In what must be regarded as one of the most important modern discussions of the Life of Cowley, W. R. Keast does not give a great deal of attention to the notion that Johnson is the father of the metaphysical revival. Furthermore, he takes a philosophical attitude toward what he considers to be the widespread misconception that Johnson had denounced the Metaphysical poets. The difficulty, as he sees it, is simply an accidental phenomenon arising from "the vicissitudes of poetic reputations and the fluctuations of critical doctrine and method."[111] Since we have come to value the poetry of Donne and his followers, we automatically assume that any critic who does not endorse them whole-heartedly must be a detractor. In Keast's view, one unfortunate result of this assumption has been a general tendency to conclude that, when Johnson is chiding the Metaphysical poets, he is advocating a poetic practice opposite to theirs. As he does in "The Theoretical Foundations of Johnson's Criticism," Keast argues that it is simply impossible to infer Johnson's critical principles from the Life of Cowley or indeed from any other single work.

Keast's purpose, then, is to set the record straight, and one of the major points he has to make is that the widely admired and influential discussion of metaphysical wit is actually something of a digression from what Johnson considered to be the major concerns of a critic, namely "the ultimate effects and values of literature -- its power to interest and move our emotions -- without which the utmost refinement of wit and technique in the poet or of analysis in the critic must prove illusory."[112] In other words, Keast explains that in the Life of Cowley Johnson is writing true to form as an affective critic, one who assumes that

> [t]he true task of the critic is to determine the value of a work on the basis of its permanent power to please and to fix the position in the scale of human ability which the powers of the author merit.[113]

As Keast understands it, Johnson believed that the poet could please only by giving the reader something that was already familiar to him -- some passion or problem common to all men everywhere. But the poet must do this in such a way that the familiar will hit home with the shock of recognition.[114]

Granted the soundness of this underlying theory and the topics which Johnson actually discusses, Keast argues that we cannot take exception to anything Johnson says about metaphysical poetry in the Life of Cowley. In this connection, he contends that, contrary to what many have assumed,

Johnson is not discussing John Donne at his best but rather

> the characteristic manner of a school -- of "a race of writers" -- which in individual poems may not predominate or may be assimilated to a compelling effect. And who will say that he has not hit off accurately the distinguishing aims and characteristics of this school?[115]

Keast believes that few modern readers would disagree with Johnson that the poetry of Cowley and Cleveland "is on the whole without any genuine power to interest and move," and he goes on to argue that "great tracts" of Donne's poetry fall into the same dull category. It is this poetry that Johnson discusses in the Life of Cowley and not "the smaller body of Donne's work which modern taste has fixed upon as providing the true measure of his talent." Keast insists that Johnson is absolutely right about the poetry of Donne which he actually discusses. Indeed, he goes further: he suggests that Johnson is also right on Donne at his best:

> If we leave aside all consideration of Donne's influence on the development of the language, of his contribution to the sophistication of the lyric, and of his fascinating personal history, how many great poems did he write? -- how many that the intelligent common reader, uninstructed by precept and unprejudiced by authority, is likely to read with passion or wonder? I venture to think that they are but few, that they are not to be found primarily among those Johnson quotes, and that the pleasure we take in them does not depend chiefly on the heterogeneity of the elements joined in their metaphors or the distance which naturally separates them.[116]

To sum up, then, we can say that in our time the Life of Cowley has

attracted a great deal of attention. As we have seen, some of our most respected scholars believe that in this work Johnson not only rescued the Metaphysical poets from oblivion but provided the critical apparatus which enabled later generations to understand and appreciate them. Moreover, although the New Critics still seem convinced that Johnson thoroughly disapproved of the poetry they admire most, two of the most prominent of them, Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate, have been frank to admit that they are indebted to his analysis of metaphysical wit. This is not to suggest, of course, that Johnson is the progenitor of the New Criticism. On the other hand, however, we cannot be certain that the New Criticism would have evolved in exactly the same way if Johnson had not written as he did in the Life of Cowley. In substance, then, we can conclude that Johnson has been involved in an important way in all phases of the modern metaphysical revival.

In the Life of Swift, which concerns us next, we encounter the most puzzling problem in Johnson scholarship -- Johnson's clearly biased treatment of Jonathan Swift. In this connection, it seems probable that few scholars would disagree with Walter Jackson Bate's opinion that Johnson the critic "is really unfair, in his total judgment, to only one author, Swift."[117] A number of theories -- none of them very satisfactory -- have been advanced to account for Johnson's uncharacteristic lack of objectivity toward his great eighteenth century predecessor. During Johnson's own lifetime,

it will be recalled, it was suggested that he bore Swift a grudge for failing to help in the matter of the Trinity M.A. Although this theory has never enjoyed much support, it is interesting to note that it has surfaced again in a recent note by Jeffrey Meyers. He believes that Johnson was insecure and hypersensitive at the time the request was made and that, as a consequence, Swift's seeming rebuff had a traumatic effect on him:

> Johnson believed that Swift had the power to get him the Dublin degree but refused to do so. At that time he was very belligerent, felt he was given more than adequate provocation by this refusal, and developed a strong dislike of Swift which lasted through the rest of his life.[118]

Lord Brougham offers the more probable explanation that a natural aversion for Swift was complicated by the fact that Johnson's "religious feelings were roused against one whom he regarded as having, like Sterne, an object of his special scorn, disgraced by his writing his sacred profession."[119] James L. Clifford suggests what distortions of fact in the Life of Swift would seem to support: that someone (Clifford suspects Dr. Thomas Birch) deliberately poisoned Johnson's mind with lies about Swift's personal life which were not disproved in Johnson's lifetime.[120]

Nevertheless, perhaps because of what Johnson had been able to forgive Milton, twentieth century scholars have tended to be dissatisfied with these more or less extrinsic explanations. As a consequence, they have searched for answers in the realm of the irrational. Early in the

century, George Saintsbury suggested that "there is no satisfactory explanation. . . . The only way to account for [Johnson's attitude] . . . is by supposing a sort of 'clot' of minor prejudices mischievously obstructing the flow of equable judgment."[121] But more recent scholars, endeavoring to dig deeper, have suggested that Johnson behaved toward Swift as he did because, unconsciously, he saw many of his own anxieties at work in his subject and, what was worse, foresaw his own probable fate exemplified in Swift's last painful years. W. B. C. Watkins was the first scholar to undertake an explanation of Johnson's prejudices as the outgrowth of "instinctive self-protection."[122] Joseph Wood Krutch has likewise implied that Johnson was writing something like vicarious autobiography in the stark and powerful account of Swift's deterioration and death. As Krutch puts it, "A great deal more is known . . . about the life and death of Jonathan Swift than Johnson knew. But has the horror of his last dreadful days ever been presented more simply or more impressively?"[123] More recently, M. J. C. Hodgart has theorized that "nearly all [Johnson's] references to Swift in conversation or writing show an aggressive hostility that comes from fear."[124] Still more recently, Jeffrey Meyers, cited above for his theory concerning the Dublin M.A., has argued that when Johnson "wrote on disease, madness, and death in the Life of Swift, he was expressing his hatred of them, and by doing so was achieving a kind of tragic catharsis of his fears, and for once, an uneasy mastery over them."[125]

As George Saintsbury so wisely observed, there is no satisfactory answer. But the problem posed by the Life of Swift is simply too intriguing to be left alone, and it is to be expected that additional explanations of Johnson's animosity toward Swift will be forthcoming.

Arriving at last at the question of Johnson's modern reputation as a critic of Dryden and Pope, we can say with George Saintsbury that

> with the Lives of Dryden and Pope we are clear of all difficulties and the critic is in his element. The poets whom he is criticising occupy the same platform as he does; they have in fact been the architects of that platform.[126]

To be sure, James M. Osborn has complained of a lack of proportion in the Life of Dryden,[127] and, as we noted in the preceding chapter, Wimsatt has complained that "Johnson's stubborn lack of interest in presentational analogy" prevented his hearing some of Pope's subtlest music.[128] Moreover, F. R. Leavis contends that at his best (as in Book IV of The Dunciad) Pope transcends the Augustan tradition and inevitably leaves Samuel Johnson behind.[129] For all that, however, there is no real controversy, and it is doubtful that there is any widespread disagreement with Bernard N. Schilling's recent judgment that, on Dryden,

> the twentieth century has tended to return to the eighteenth and the sensible criticism of Samuel Johnson. The reader will see how frequently in this volume [i.e. Dryden, a Collection of Critical Essays] modern opinion relies upon or takes seriously the largeness of Johnson's view.[130]

Similarly, it seems unlikely that many would contest George Watson's estimate that the Life of Pope "is still the best general account of Pope in existence."[131]

But it should be recalled that no one has ever suggested that any other critic could rival Johnson on the two greatest poets of his own school. Accordingly, the only real change to be reported in the fortunes of the Lives of Dryden and Pope is the rather obvious revolution in the reputations of the two poets themselves. As we noted in Chapter Three, these reputations have undergone a rather dramatic metamorphosis since the nineteen-forties and Johnson's stock has climbed with theirs. In any case, we can rest assured that Johnson's expertise on Dryden and Pope is no longer cited as proof of his incompetence as a critic of "genuine" poetry.

Despite the fact that there is little controversy in connection with the Lives of Dryden and Pope, there is nevertheless one study of the latter which merits close attention, for it is a study which seems to provide additional documentation of Eliot's and Leavis' conception of Johnson as a critic at work within a positive tradition. It is a study which is reminiscent of Arthur Sherbo's Samuel Johnson, Editor of Shakespeare, for the author, Benjamin Boyce, clearly entertains serious doubts about Johnson's originality as a critic. Although he does not go so far as to label Johnson a plagiarist, he nevertheless announces that he has

> come to the conclusion that Johnson's remarks on Pope were not uniformly superior to those of previous critics and that he was, to an extent that probably few readers appreciate, regularly dependent upon those critics for direction in his commentary.[132]

What particularly troubles Boyce is his conclusion that Johnson's "best criticism and most of the genuine literary criticism . . . occur not because Johnson was provoked by a poem but because he was provoked by a critic, usually Dennis or Warton." Because Johnson had no previous commentators to follow on Pope's later works -- most notably, the Moral Essays, the Horace, and the Satires -- Boyce believes his criticism went flat.[133] The inference he draws is that, although an excellent critic, Johnson was nevertheless one who could not function independently. But if Eliot and Leavis are right about Johnson's relation to his milieu, absolute independence on Johnson's part would have constituted something of an aberration. In any case, Boyce seems to be describing the exact relationship which Eliot and Leavis found so intriguing:

> Johnson is dull when the world is dull. He is as a critic most interesting when he is arguing, even perversely arguing. Too often the value of his comments would be much enhanced if the reader were familiar with the criticisms he was criticising. As he said, he was not writing just to philosophers and poets; hence he did not beat over the ground well covered by Dennis or Spence of Warton, and he is consequently more readable. But the readability of his Pope is due in part to the sense Johnson had of being in converse with worthy opponents; as in

> those many dramatic colloquies reported by Boswell, so in writing his criticism of Pope, Johnson listened to one speaker and then another, replying roughly to some remarks, ignoring others, borrowing the language of one man, handing a rare compliment to someone else in a moment of happy agreement, perpetually demanding the last word, even if he had to roar to get it. The pity is that the average reader of the Pope does not hear the other voices in the long and interesting and yet frequently only desultory conversation.[134]

With Dryden and Pope, we come to the end of our list of poets dealt with by Johnson who still enjoy major reputations in our day. An obvious difficulty here is where to draw the line. It need scarcely be pointed out that this chapter could be extended almost indefinitely if one chose to undertake a consideration of Johnson's influence on the reputations of writers who are not generally thought to have an importance comparable to those we have just been looking at. Yet in all probability such an extended discussion would do no more than prove what doubtless will be admitted in any case -- that when a writer discussed by Johnson is recalled in our day, the chances are very good that what Johnson had to say about him will enter into the discussion in a significant way. But perhaps we should give some attention to one more poet, Thomas Gray. It will be recalled that the Life of Gray was a source of outrage at the time of its publication and throughout the nineteenth century. But unlike Dryden and Pope, Gray lost rather than gained ground in the twentieth century. Indeed, it would seem that Gray's reputation was in serious decline by 1916, when, in defense of Johnson's

criticism of the Bard and the Progress of Poesy, George Saintsbury asked:

> Will any critical admirer of Gray place his hand on his waistcoat and deny that Gray . . . is mechanical -- in diction, in versification, in almost every respect of technique and architectonic? Was there ever a poet less spontaneous, less inevitable?[135]

Certainly, there is a great deal of irony in the fact that Johnson's strictures on Gray, celebrated for over a century as conclusive proof of his obtuseness, have lately come to be cited as conclusive proof of his "excellence as a critic of eighteenth century verse."[136]

Finally, then, we can conclude our discussion of Johnson's judgments of specific authors with the following observations: the Lives of Swift and Milton are not now regarded as helpful in interpreting the work of those two authors. Yet as we have seen throughout this study, the Life of Milton has always caused a great number of readers to test their opinions, and it seems fair to suggest that in this area Johnson continues to exert one of the most powerful negative influences in all of literature. But Johnson's influence is clearly positive in modern criticism of Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, and the Metaphysical poets. Indeed, it seems probable that he is the most influential single critic in all four areas.

* * * *

Prior to undertaking our conclusion, it may be helpful to focus our attention briefly on the most important issues which divide modern opinion

on Johnson's criticism, issues which will doubtless be with us for some time to come. The one great overriding issue in our day is, of course, the question of the proper relation of literature to life. Closely related to this issue are two subsidiary difficulties: first, Johnson's ideas on the general and the particular in art and, secondly, his ideas on the moral function of poetry.

Concerning the question of the relation of literature to life, we can note an interesting shift in opinion from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Although the majority of nineteenth century commentators were convinced that Johnson's criticism was invalid owing to his apparent inability to follow the flights of the poetic imagination or to hear the subtler nuances of versification, a significant number of writers were nevertheless willing to praise his understanding of human nature and human experience. In the early years of the twentieth century, D. Nichol Smith and Sir Walter Raleigh took up Johnson's criticism precisely because they believed that he had an incomparable ability to judge literature in terms of its fidelity to life. Indeed, Raleigh was willing to concede in this connection that Johnson knew more of life than of the purely technical side of literature: "[I]t is not on vexed questions of literature that Johnson is seen at his best and greatest, but in judgements on human life and human motives."[137]

Respect for Johnson's skill in judging human life and motives persisted into the nineteen-twenties and thirties; indeed, such respect probably

accounts for his survival in those years. In this regard, we can cite the anonymous reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement whom we encountered early in Chapter Three. This writer clearly suspected, in 1926, that Johnson's reputation as a critic might not outlive Sir Walter Raleigh. He was, as we have seen, convinced that Johnson was entirely deficient in virtually every important skill and sensibility requisite in a critic of poetry. But he nevertheless believed that Johnson had a slight chance of survival owing to his prodigious understanding of human nature and human experience:

> No one held more tenaciously to the sound doctrine that literature belongs to life and is nothing if it allows any divorce to come between life and itself. . . . Of art, Johnson's conception was somewhat narrow: his purely aesthetic gift was certainly not remarkable. But in his hold on life he has no superior among all the men who have written much about the criticism of literature. This is where his strength lies.[138]

It is to be noted that, on the positive side, the reviewer states the position of such recent Johnson supporters as Joseph Wood Krutch, Jean Hagstrum, W. R. Keast, and Walter Jackson Bate. But over the past thirty years we have seen the emergence of a powerful counter force, a school of criticism which insists that to make meaningful aesthetic judgments one is compelled to effect a divorce of literature from life. Indeed, as we saw in the preceding chapter, Johnson ranks as a non-entity in two important modern histories of criticism precisely because, in the opinion of the historians, he could not keep art and life sorted out in their respective

categories. There can be no doubt that this point of view, the point of view that insists on the concept of art as entity, has tended to dominate the literary scene. As the result of such influence, even writers sympathetic to Johnson have sometimes been intimidated. A notable example of this kind of intimidation is seen in a recent essay by Ian Watt, one in which his obvious intention is to laud Johnson's great expertise in what he calls the literature of experience. He defines this literature as one which derives from "literal as opposed to imaginative truth" but concedes at once that it is a literature which is not entirely safe:

> [The literature of experience demands a kind of judgment which] is contrary to most modern critical theory, with its insistence on the literary artefact as an autonomous verbal structure best considered as separate both from its author and from any relation to real life. Obviously the correspondence of an author's statements to reality or truth is even more difficult to establish than intrinsic literary excellence where we can at least find all -- or most -- of the evidence on the page before us. We must also remember that there is a real danger in confusing art and life; for one thing, it tends to authorize the common "let's have no nonsense" sort of Philistinism, and Johnson has had many admirers in this camp: Raleigh himself, as Virginia Woolf noted, in his later years "ceased to profess literature, and became instead a Professor of Life."[139]

But Watt concedes that "the other extreme position is even more impossible." Unfortunately, however, he does not attempt to designate a reasonable compromise between these two undesirable extremes. He con-

cludes his essay by quoting Johnson's "On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet" to support the idea that, although "we may not want to go as far as Johnson did in disregarding the distinction between literature and life," we must nevertheless concede that Johnson's total achievement "constitutes an impressively eloquent, consistent, and truthful vision of human experience."[140] Insofar as Johnson's reputation is concerned, the battle lines on this issue are clearly drawn, with Wellek and the New Critics on the one side and Krutch, Hagstrum, Keast, and Bate on the other. The inability of Watt to find a comfortable place to stand between these two camps is probably emblematic of the predicament of a large segment of modern scholarship. In other words, the troublesome question of the relation of literature to life is unresolved, and will no doubt continue to pose a difficulty in Johnson's reputation as a critic.

The question of the proper relationship between the general and the particular in art has been given considerable attention in the preceding chapter. Here again the battle lines are rather clearly drawn, with William K. Wimsatt on the one side and Jean Hagstrum on the other. At issue is what Johnson had in mind when he called for an appeal from criticism to nature, or when he caused Imlac, in chapter ten of Rasselas, to advise his pupil against numbering the streaks of the tulip. As we have seen, Hagstrum and Keast argue that, for Johnson, general nature embodies a psychological link between the poet and his audience. Moreover,

they insist that Johnson's ideas on this score have timeless validity. Wimsatt on the other hand believes that, in Johnson's ideas about general nature, we see the last gasp of a

> [neo-Platonic] doctrine of ideal form. . . . In Johnson the literary theorist we confront a system of ideas (in part rigidly consistent, in part rather manifestly inconsistent, in part at least paradoxical) which constitutes a massive summary of the neo-Platonic drive in literary theory and of its difficulties.[141]

The point to be stressed, of course, is that Wimsatt denies that Johnson's ideas on this score have any modern relevance while Hagstrum and Keast vigorously endorse those ideas.

As we noted in the preceding chapter, René Wellek does not go quite so far in dismissing Johnson's ideas about general nature, which he likewise sees as having "a very respectable ancestry in neo-Platonic aesthetics." Although he is plainly no admirer of Johnson's brand of Neoclassicism, a position which he holds to be "deplorable in its desiccated abstractness," he concedes that abstract Neoclassicism nevertheless gave Johnson some slight understanding of the autonomy of art. Moreover, he concedes that, although "Practically all critical theory since Johnson has run in the opposite direction," Johnson's view of the matter is not entirely erroneous: "all art must be in some way general in order not to be completely incomprehensible or uninteresting. The very nature of language is to work by generalizations." He concludes with the observation that "Dr. Johnson was

pushing the extreme of generality, while we are apt to stress the opposite."[142]

Other prominent scholars have tended toward the same sort of middle view. Joseph Wood Krutch, for example, argues that

> the question of the general versus the specific in poetry has never really been clearly determined, and for all the successful violations of the rule which Johnson thought established, it still remains true that the individual in art must be something more than merely an individual as surely as the representative of a species must somehow manage to be an individual also.[143]

Geoffrey Tillotson has similarly argued not only that Johnson's ideas on this subject have merit but that they are in fact applicable to all great poetry:

> Johnson . . . knows that there are such flowers as tulips, that some tulips are streaked, and that the botanist may examine the number of streaks. Johnson knows everything, but he does not want the poet, who also knows everything, to use such knowledge as he has acquired as a botanist. . . . Johnson's principle surely holds for all great poetry. Dante's imagery is the reverse of esoteric. Donne's compasses are things alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness, even though Johnson was not quite at liberty to see this.[144]

In addition to the foregoing generally flexible comments, we have also seen the recent emergence of a point of view which insists that, although Johnson demands large general properties and large appearances, he likewise demands throughout his criticism that these be qualified by their opposites. Perhaps the strongest and most succinct statement of this point of

view appears in W. R. Keast's review of Scott Elledge's "The Background and Development in English Criticism of the Theories of Generality and Particularity." In this essay, Elledge arrives at a conclusion roughly comparable to that taken by Joseph Wood Krutch in reference to Johnson's didacticism in the Shakespeare criticism. Basing his argument primarily on what he considers to be a disparity between Imlac's advice about the streaks of the tulip and Johnson's praise of the Seasons in the Life of Thomson, Elledge contends that Johnson simply fails to practice what he preaches on the grandeur of generality.[145] Keast's response to this thesis is strongly reminiscent of R. S. Crane's review of Atkins' English Literary Criticism: 17th & 18th Centuries, for he contends that Elledge has constructed an arbitrary framework of ideas about the general and the particular -- these derived from such diverse critics as Longinus, Dennis, and Addison -- and then ingested Johnson's ideas into that irrelevant framework in order to prove a preconceived point. Keast insists that Elledge has simply failed to understand the Life of Thomson, in which, as he sees it, Johnson praises the poet not simply because he took note of minute details of nature but because he could do this at the same time that he "comprehends the vast."[146] Viewed as a whole, Keast tells us, Johnson's critical position "insists not upon the superiority of the general to the particular or of the particular to the general, but upon the necessary union and coexistence of both in literary works." The misconceptions on this score arise, in Keast's opinion, from

isolated statements which Johnson had to make on poets who did not achieve the proper balance -- who erred toward either of the two poles. But what Keast clearly calls for here is the inside approach to Johnson's criticism advocated by R. S. Crane.[147]

In remarks which reveal his affinity with the Chicago critics, M. H. Abrams likewise explains that "the neo-classic theorist was apt to pose the standard of aesthetic excellence, like that of moral excellence, in terms of a mean between extremes, or else in terms of a conjunction of opposite qualities." Like Keast, Abrams believes that Johnson is

> often misinterpreted because he usually argues to the single point or document at issue, by an appeal to only so much of the general principle as the case requires. . . . Read completely rather than in selected passages, then, Johnson may be said to locate the highest and rarest excellence in the representation of the individualized type, the circumstantially general, and the novel-familiar.[148]

During the years when these views were being propounded, we have seen the emergence of still another point of view which holds that Johnson's ideas about the general and the particular should be related not to his aesthetic theory alone but to what might be called his philosophy of life. As we noted in the preceding chapter, Walter Jackson Bate has offered a persuasive case for the proposition that the generality sought by Johnson pertains to "the most humanly pertinent generality. . . . a species of symbolic value."[149] In a similar vein, Paul Fussell has offered the view

that Johnson's notions on the general and particular are rooted in "the idea of sheer human continuity." To be useful over the long haul, literature must, Johnson believed, divest itself of excessive particularity. Hence, in Fussell's view,

> The great Johnsonian critical principle of "the grandeur of generality" involves at bottom a prodigious humanistic faith in the dignity and permanence of the central element in human nature. It is less a critical observation than a moral and philosophic article of belief.[150]

Arieh Sachs has recently suggested that, for Johnson, "the grandeur of generality" also embodied a didactic function. He makes exactly the point that Fussell makes and goes on to explain that "[a] recognition of this basic uniformity is supremely important because by providing a release from the tensions of self and subjectivity it leads to salvation, and therefore we find it reiterated in varying contexts throughout Johnson's writings."[151] But surely David Daiches makes the most thought-provoking comment of all concerning Johnson's ideas about a permanent central element in human nature. He insists that we must agree with Johnson here or throw our books away, for

> any theory of literary value which sees literature as some kind of illumination of the nature of man is committed to the position that that nature is unchanging, unless it is prepared to concede that the literature of past ages has ceased to be of value.[152]

In sum, then, we can say that, although the question of the proper

relation of the general to the particular may continue to pose a problem, our attitude toward Johnson's position on this issue seems to be generally sympathetic, more sympathetic, perhaps, than one might anticipate.

By far the most troublesome problem in Johnson's criticism -- a problem which has confounded critics in every generation since his death -- is his didacticism, his apparent desire to see poetry serve morality through precept or example. As we have seen in this and the preceding chapter, a great many modern writers have found this position difficult to reconcile with his insistence that poetry present a realistic imitation of human experience. Perhaps the most lucid statement of the conflict is provided by David Daiches:

> Johnson finds himself in a dilemma here, though he does not clearly recognize it as such. If a poet's duty is to represent human nature accurately and vividly and at the same time to arrange his story so that it provides moral instruction for the reader, then it must follow that human nature in itself must be edifying. Sir Philip Sidney had argued that poetry should be morally instructive, but, well aware that life as it is does not convey a moral lesson to the observer, he insisted that the poet create a new and better world. Johnson wants to have it both ways, which would be fair enough if he believed that the real world is in fact morally edifying, but he knew very well that it was not and despised those facile optimists who thought that it was.[153]

As we have seen, a number of writers have seemed to accept Johnson's didacticism as a personal quirk to be overlooked. In this connection, because of his notable silence on the subject, W. R. Keast may be one of

these. But several others have attempted to give some satisfactory explanation for Johnson's seeming intransigence on this score. Joseph Wood Krutch, for example, believes that Johnson's didacticism is a weakness which he shared with his age, a weakness which, in his view, stemmed from a general inability to understand the Aristotelian theory of moral uplift though a purgation of pity and fear. But he believes that Johnson's problem was nevertheless rather special; he suspects that Johnson often complained because he failed to find "something specifically Christian" in a poem or play.[154] Helen Gardner has likewise offered an intriguing explanation. She believes that the problem of Johnson's didacticism stems from the inability of later critics to understand Johnson's great sensitivity to literature. She suggests that, when Johnson complains of a lack of poetic justice in Shakespeare, he is often complaining because a scene is simply too painful for him. Of Johnson's response to "the horrible behavior of Prince John of Lancaster" she says:

> Johnson is not, I think, complaining that Shakespeare does not preach us a short sermon on good faith; but that nobody in the play expresses any of the feelings of outrage that such cold-blooded treachery must evoke in decent people. He . . . assumes the decency of the audience whose feelings require dramatic expression.[155]

But it is interesting to note that René Wellek does not condemn Johnson's didacticism. He believes, of course, that Johnson's demand for moral

purpose often got in the way of his demand for realism. But he does not condemn: "Didacticism has a venerable tradition in criticism, and I am not disposed to dispute its rights if they are properly limited. In Johnson they are not always properly limited."[156] Moreover, as we noted in Chapter Four, Jean Hagstrum attempts to account for Johnson's didacticism with the explanation that, for Johnson, Nature constituted in the final analysis a moral order. Taking a different tack, Walter Jackson Bate explains that what Johnson really had in mind is the illumination of human experience in such a way that the ultimate implications of life will be made clear. What the poet must bring about is "The active dawning into meaning . . . in which life at last is felt to 'go forwards.'"[157]

Of all the writers who have commented in our time on Johnson's didacticism, T. S. Eliot seems to have been the least disturbed by it. He simply argues that we have to reinterpret the language of any critic of the past if we are to make him relevant to our own age. All Johnson requires, Eliot explains, is that poetry be edifying. Noting that we surely expect to "derive some benefit as well as pleasure" from good poetry, Eliot makes his case as follows:

> If, therefore, we allow to "edification" all the elasticity of which the term is capable, it seems to come to no more than the assertion that poetry should have some serious value for the reader: a proposition which will not be denied and which is therefore hardly worth affirming. Our only dis-

> agreement will be about the kind of content which we consider edifying. Our real difficulty with Johnson's view is rather different. We distinguish more clearly between the conscious intention of the writer, and the effect of the work. We distrust verse in which the author is deliberately aiming to instruct or to persuade.[158]

It is to be noted in connection with Eliot's comment that we have encountered many critics in this study who reject Johnson's ideas about the moral function of art. But we have encountered none who attack his position from the premise that poetry should not be edifying. Accordingly, when we admit that Johnson's didacticism continues to constitute a difficulty we should stress the point that it is precisely that: most writers deal with it as a difficulty rather than as a blind spot or aberration. The same might be said of Johnson's position on the two topics discussed earlier. Although the battle lines seem clearly drawn on the overall question of the relation of literature to life, we cannot say that there has been a massive tendency in our time to abandon Johnson's position altogether. Moreover, although some controversy still arises on the question of the relationship of the general to the particular in art, it seems clear from the foregoing discussion that Johnson's position on this issue seems more congenial than otherwise to most of the writers who have recently commented on the subject. The point to be stressed, therefore, is simply this: the three major difficulties in Johnson's modern reputation as a critic arise because in each case he took a strong stand on a troublesome question for which there is no satisfactory final answer.

NOTES

CHAPTER V

[1]*Dr. Johnson and His Circle*, pp. 206-07.

[2]*Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), I, xxxiii.

[3]CI (August 1, 1908), 164. See also Charles F. Johnson's *Shakespeare and His Critics*, cited in Chapter Two, note 7.

[4]*Ibid.*

[5]*Samuel Johnson*, p. 291.

[6](Oxford, 1928), pp. 48-49. Smith believed that Johnson's *Notes* heralded a new approach to Shakespeare, a study of the poet through his characters (p. 80). In other words, he sees Johnson as a precursor of Bradley.

[7]*A History of Shakespearian Criticism* (London, 1932), I, 60.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 62.

[9]*Shakespeare Criticism from the Beginning to 1765* (London, 1932), p. 79.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 84.

[11]*Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

[12]*English Shakespearian Criticism in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1932), p. 128.

[13]*Ibid.*, pp. 133, 136.

[14]*Ibid.*, p. 138.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 140.

[16]Ibid., p. 125.

[17]Samuel Johnson, pp. 289-90. Other recent discussions of Johnson's achievement as editor should not be overlooked. Arthur M. Eastman has argued that Johnson outstripped all of his predecessors in providing a text which the ordinary reader might find congenial. Eastman believes that Johnson, through skillful use of stage directions, provided a text which approximated as closely as possible the acted play. See "Johnson's Shakespeare and the Laity," PMLA, LXV (1950), 1112-21. Robert E. Scholes believes that Johnson performed a far more important service in reversing the tendency of eighteenth century editors to discount the Folio in favor of earlier Quarto versions. In Scholes' view, Johnson "clearly and permanently established the First Folio as the only Folio text of authority. He constantly sought to limit conjecture to its proper sphere, and to adduce bibliographical evidence of some kind for his emendations. He clearly indicated for the first time that the best text was the most Shakespearian, not what the editor thought the most felicitous, and he left the authority of the 'ancient books' on a firmer footing than he found it. It would be well for modern critics who are apt to scorn the achievement of all Shakespeare's first editors in the eighteenth century to consider the debt which later Shakespearian studies owe to such a pioneer as Dr. Johnson, even in that 'modern' and 'scientific' department of scholarship -- bibliographical criticism." "Dr. Johnson and the Bibliographical Criticism of Shakespeare," Shakespeare Quarterly, XI (Spring 1960), 171. Some notice should also be given here to Karl Young's investigation of the question of how well Johnson the editor used Shakespeare's sources for comparative purposes. He concluded that "in no case does [Johnson] present anything like a thorough-going comparison, or a summary based upon an industrious examination of details. Although he offers independently one or two acute bibliographical observations, he brings forward no new sources. He is far from being comprehensive even in mentioning the findings of his predecessors." Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare: One Aspect, University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature, No. 18 (Madison, 1923), p. 223.

[18]Samuel Johnson, p. 310. Agostino Lombardo has subsequently carried this idea somewhat further, arguing that Johnson's description of the perfect poet in Rasselas "sprang from an actual experience, from Johnson's reading, and above all from his reading of Shakespeare. There is only one point at which the portrait of Shakespeare which Johnson was to draw in his admirable Preface does not coincide with the definitions given [in Rasselas]. According to Imlac, the poet must have a moral or didactic aim." But didacticism aside, Lombardo insists that "the Shakespeare of the Preface corresponds exactly to Imlac's idea of a poet; not only are the same

concepts expressed, but even the same words are used." "The Importance of Imlac," trans. Barbara Arnett Melchiori, Bicentenary Essays on Rasselas, ed. Magdi Wahba (Cairo, 1959), pp. 33-34.

[19]Samuel Johnson, p. 311. It should be pointed out that, although he acknowledges the "acuteness and good sense of some of his notes," Krutch nevertheless believes the Preface to be Johnson's "chief contribution to the understanding and evaluation of Shakespeare" (p. 279).

[20]Ibid., pp. 331-32, passim.

[21]Ibid., p. 315.

[22]Ibid., pp. 320-21. John Hardy has argued recently that we place entirely too much emphasis on Johnson's complaint that Shakespeare often fails to enforce a specific moral, and that, as a consequence, we "overlook the deeper, though less obvious, sense in which Johnson considered Shakespeare a morally instructive poet." "The 'Poet of Nature' and Self-Knowledge: One Aspect of Johnson's Moral Reading of Shakespeare," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXXVI (1967), 157. Hardy believes that Johnson, who was always preoccupied with human motives, found Shakespeare satisfying because he "[sounded] the depths of the heart for the motives of action [which] enabled each reader to see more clearly into his own heart" (p. 156). Moreover, he suggests that Johnson admired Shakespeare precisely because he compelled his readers to undertake such a realistic introspection: "Shakespeare held his reader's imagination captive without letting him escape from the real world into a world of fantasy, from himself to beings of another species" (p. 157).

[23]Samuel Johnson, pp. 334-35.

[24]Ibid., p. 336.

[25]Ibid., p. 335.

[26](Cambridge, 1944), pp. 13, 7-8. Warren Fleischauer has subsequently undertaken a detailed study of Johnson's editing and criticism of the history plays, a study in which one of his major aims was to test the validity of Wilson's theory. See "Dr. Johnson's Editing and Criticism of Shakespeare's Lancastrian Cycle," unpubl. diss. (Western Reserve University, 1951), pp. 12-13. Fleischauer concludes that Wilson's theory is valid, provided the reader is careful to discriminate between critical attitudes which are peculiar to the eighteenth century and the social, political,

moral, and philosophical assumptions of the Elizabethan age which, in Fleischauer's opinion, "may still be traced in [Johnson's] commentary on Shakespeare" (pp. 603-06).

[27]Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century, p. 48. Jean Hagstrum has likewise praised Johnson's notes as "perhaps the best expression in the English language of what always has been and doubtless always will be the layman's approach to literature, an approach which, in all truth, nearly everyone follows, gladly or grudgingly, at some time or another." Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism, p. 61.

[28]"Samuel Johnson's Edition of Shakespeare: 1765," unpubl. diss. (Yale University, 1947), p. 66.

[29]"Dr. Johnson's Editing and Criticism of Shakespeare's Lancastrian Cycle," p. 592.

[30]See Johnson's Notes to Shakespeare, ed. Arthur Sherbo, I-III (Los Angeles, 1956-58). Sherbo is also editor of the volumes containing Johnson's Shakespeare criticism in the Yale edition of the Works.

[31]Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, XLII (Urbana, 1956), viii.

[32]Ibid., pp. 61-64.

[33]Ibid., p. 30.

[34]Ibid., p. 50.

[35]Ibid., p. 60.

[36]RES, n. s. IX (February 1958), 92. Ridley was likewise perplexed by Sherbo's insistence that, when turning to Johnson on a difficult passage of Shakespeare, we "ask further" if the Note is really Johnson's: "Why must one ask further? If what we are looking for is the clarification of Shakespeare, the further question is irrelevant; the light shed, adequate or inadequate, is the same whether it is shed by Johnson directly, or by reflection. The further question is only to the point if what we are trying to determine is the extent of Johnson's debts and the degree of his honesty in acknowledging them. It is on this that Mr. Sherbo concentrates his energy. I do not think that all his evidence for the extent of Johnson's unacknowledged debts, particularly to Heath, is cogent, but he does make out a persuasive

case. One may, however, still be doubtful whether the case was worth making out. Johnson as a critic seems to stay pretty solidly where he was" (p. 92).

[37]In what could scarcely be called a friendly review, W. K. Wimsatt gives a succinct and appreciative description of Sherbo's rather complex achievement in Samuel Johnson, Editor of Shakespeare: "[This] is a sort of study which will have its uses. A reader who will lay the correct editions of Johnson's Shakespeare and a few other texts side by side with Appendixes A, B, C, D, F, G will find a guide (A) to Johnson's miscellaneous reading as revealed in his Shakespeare editing, (B) to the resemblances between Johnson's editing and five other Shakespeare commentaries published in the period 1746-1765, (C) to the resemblances between Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare and earlier Shakespeare criticism as far back as Dryden, (D) to Johnson's use of certain key critical terms in his Shakespeare annotation and his Lives of the Poets, (F) to Johnson's additions and omissions, changes, corrections, and the like in the Johnson-Steevens variorum Shakespeare editions of 1773 and 1778, and (G) to a select list of notes on Shakespeare which specially show Johnson's critical 'likes' and 'dislikes.' In addition, Appendix E is a 'Numberical Analysis' (i. e. count) of the several types of notes for each play in the 1765 edition -- both Johnson's original notes and those which he adopted from Warburton and Theobald, with or without his own added comment. I dwell thus on the Appendixes to Mr. Sherbo's study, putting the tail at the front, because I think that here, or at least in materials of this sort, is the gist of his findings." MLN, LXXIII (March 1958), 214-15. Wimsatt believes that Sherbo, perhaps like Johnson, displays "a certain absentmindedness about the achievements of earlier workers in the field -- perhaps a tendency to assume that their kind of finding was not really relevant" (p. 216).

[38]Samuel Johnson, Editor of Shakespeare, p. 75. Johnson is quoted from Sherbo's text.

[39]Ibid., p. 44.

[40]"In Defense of Dr. Johnson," Shakespeare Quarterly, VIII (Autumn 1957), 493. Sherbo advances a persuasive and apparently well-documented argument to support his thesis that many of Johnson's glosses and emendations were lifted without acknowledgement from Edwards, Gray, Upton, Holt, and -- above all -- from Heath's Revisal of Shakespear's Text, which Sherbo believes Johnson had access to prior to its publication. One of Eastman's major rejoinders in this connection should be noted: "As Profes-

sor Sherbo himself admits, Volumes I and II [of Johnson's edition] cannot have been obligated to Heath since they were printed prior to Heath's writing. Agreements between these two volumes and Heath are, therefore, indisputably coincidental. But if coincidence can and does account for such agreements, it would seem reasonable to accept it as explanation for later agreements. Professor Sherbo argues, however, that since the frequency of agreement in four of the later volumes is greater than in these first two, coincidence is out of the question. Such reasoning seems to me strained, for the number in no case is very large" (p. 495). In substance, Eastman contends that Johnson's seeming plagiarism can be explained by "the elementary fact that minds intent on the same problems often arrive at similar answers" (p. 498).

[41]Shakespeare Quarterly, IX (Summer 1958), 433.

[42]"Samuel Johnson: 1709-1959," Tennessee Studies in Literature, VI (1961), 114.

[43]Ibid.

[44]"Dr. Johnson's Spectacles," p. 187.

[45]"Johnson as Critic," pp. 82-83.

[46]Sir Herbert Read seems to be the lone exponent of the nineteenth century view in the post World War II era. He wrote in the nineteen-fifties that the Romantics, particularly Coleridge, are to be praised for uprooting a "formidable false tradition -- the tradition of Dryden and Pope, erected to pontifical magnitude by Dr. Johnson." The True Voice of Feeling. Studies in English Romantic Poetry (London, 1953), p. 53. Read leaves no doubt that, in his opinion, Coleridge had rendered Johnson's Shakespeare criticism totally valueless: "The distinction of Coleridge, which puts him head and shoulders above every other English critic, is due to his introduction of a philosophical method of criticism. English criticism before his time, in the hands of a Dryden, a Warton or a Johnson, had been a criticism of technique, of craftsmanship -- sometimes presupposing some general rules, such as that of dramatic unity, but oftener a merely mechanical, and at best an individualistic and arbitrary activity, resulting in such perversities, or rather inadequacies, as Johnson's remarks on Shakespeare. Coleridge changed all that" (p. 169).

[47]"Introduction," Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare (New York, 1960), pp. xxiv-xxv.

[48]"Johnson on Shakespeare," The New Rambler, No B, XVII (1965), 2.

[49]Of all the commentators on Johnson's Milton criticism, Thomas De Quincey appears to have come closest to apoplexy. Of Johnson's parting shot at Paradise Lost, he wrote: "O Sam! kill us not with munificence." The Collected Writings of Thomas DeQuincey, ed. D. Masson, IV (London, 1897), 114. Other well-known reactions deserve mention. In Johnson's own time, William Cowper wrote the Rev. Unwin that, although he had been "well entertained" with Johnson's biography, Johnson's political animus and insensitivity of ear had put him into a rage. His concluding remark has been often quoted: "Oh! I could thrash his old jacket, till I made his pension jingle in his pocket." The Selected Letters of William Cowper, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York, 1951), pp. 53-54. Anthony Trollope reports an even more explosive reaction: "I had my strong enthusiasms, and remember throwing out of the window in Northumberland Street, where I lived, a volume of Johnson's Lives of the Poets, because he spoke sneeringly of Lycidas." Autobiography (Berkeley, 1947), p. 45.

[50]It was noted earlier that George Sherburn believed Johnson had been unfair to Milton owing to prejudice. See A Literary History of England, p. 996. Among leading Milton scholars, James Holly Hanford, Merritt Y. Hughes, Marjorie Hope Nicolson, and Douglas Bush have expressed the opinion that Johnson's Milton criticism is warped by animosity. To be sure, Hanford acknowledges that Johnson has nothing but praise for Paradise Lost. But he nevertheless points out that "On the whole . . . his treatment of Milton is reactionary [and characterized by] churlishness." A Milton Handbook (New York, 1961), pp. 334-35. See also The Poems of John Milton, ed. James Holly Hanford, 2nd ed. (New York, 1953), p. 22. For an early view of Merritt Y. Hughes, see Paradise Regained, The Minor Poems, and Samson Agonistes, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1937), pp. xlviii-xlix. Douglas Bush is only slightly more cordial toward Johnson: "Apart from political prejudice, Dr. Johnson's estimate was a mixture of insight and blindness." English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century, 1600-1660, 2nd ed. revised (New York, 1962), p. 377. The severest of all modern Milton scholars is Marjorie Hope Nicolson. Of Johnson's complaint that Samson Agonistes has no middle, Miss Nicolson writes: "As so often when he wrote about Milton, Johnson seemed to go out of his way to be perversely wrong." John Milton, A Reader's Guide to his Poetry (New York, 1965), p. 357. Some mention should also be made in this connection of M. E. Grenander's defense of Milton against the same charge. The crux of his argument is that "Johnson and the critics who succeeded him . . . regarded the terms beginning, middle, and end as being applicable to the representation of the plot rather than to the action imitated. But according

to Aristotle, the two need not coincide. He says . . . that incidents before the opening scene may constitute a part of the beginning or middle, and, in the case of Milton's play, I think they do." "Samson's Middle: Aristotle and Dr. Johnson," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXIV (1955), 378.

[51]On Poetry and Poets, pp. 167-68.

[52]The Breaking of The Circle, revised edition (New York, 1960), p. 4. Needless to say, Miss Nicolson believes that neither Eliot nor Johnson is to be trusted on Milton. See John Milton, A Reader's Guide to his Poetry, p. 9. In this connection, it should be noted that Allen Tate, a critic whom we will encounter in the text a few pages further along, has argued that, of the two, Johnson is probably the less prejudiced critic: "[Johnson] hates Milton for a regicide; but his judgment of Paradise Lost is as disinterested as any judgment we should find today; certainly no more crippled by historical prejudice than Mr. Eliot's own views of Milton." On the Limits of Poetry (New York, 1948), p. 342.

[53]Samuel Johnson, p. 485.

[54]"Johnson as Moderator," Notes and Queries, December, 1956, p. 518.

[55]Ibid., pp. 521, 517-18. Richard Harter Fogle has suggested that, in the Life of Milton, Johnson may have set out deliberately to achieve the most dramatic contrast possible between the poet and his greatest work. If such was the case, Fogle believes the result is not without ironic implications: "[Johnson] dislikes not only Milton but also the great bulk of his poetry, and by the contrast Paradise Lost shines out the more brightly, most truly like a good deed in a naughty world. Is his method the intoxication of antithesis, a great tour de force of sheer rhetoric? In any case it is striking; but [if this is true] perhaps Macaulay's notorious essay is poetic justice, and Johnson is fitly suspended on the points of his own two-horned antithesis; he has made Milton a fabulous monster, and is now himself shown forth as monstrous by a less-skilled showman." "Johnson and Coleridge on Milton," Bucknell Review, XIV (1966), 29. Fogle explains that, from the point of view of Coleridge, "who continually asserted the essential unity of genius and judgment, nature and art, and achievement and character, Johnson's Milton would have been a mere monster" (p. 30). Fogle clearly finds Coleridge's point of view the more congenial of the two, and he concludes with an analogy which, granted some of Pope's implications about Sporus, may be termed unfortunate: "I fear that Coleridge might . . . have echoed Pope on Sporus in 'The Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot' in his opinion of

Dr. Johnson: 'And he himself one vile antithesis'" (p. 32).

A more common explanation for the difficulties surrounding Johnson's comments on Paradise Lost has recently been given vivid expression by George Watson: "Johnson writes of Paradise Lost as if the poem were a visit to the dentist, or a regrettable aspect of Sunday observance like church-attendance. His analysis is an act of self-persuasion, and one unconvincing and unconvinced reason after another is advanced why the epic has to be praised." The Literary Critics, pp. 99-100.

[56]The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, p. 188.

[57]The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism (Oxford, 1965), p. 17.

[58]Milton's Paradise Lost (London, 1951), p. 8.

[59]English Literary Criticism: 17th & 18th Centuries, p. 294.

[60]The Mid-Eighteenth Century, p. 332.

[61]A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, I, 80-81. One of the best-known statements of this point of view is, of course, that of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. See Understanding Poetry (New York, 1938), pp. 14-16, 612.

[62]Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism, p. 46.

[63]Samuel Johnson, p. 187.

[64]"Johnson as Critic," p. 72.

[65]Ibid., p. 75.

[66]Ibid., p. 76. Leavis' further comment should also be noted: "One may perhaps add, in fairness to Johnson, whose approach does at any rate promote this recognition, that it is a lesser thing than post-Johnsonian taste has tended to make it."

[67]On Poetry and Poets, p. 175.

[68]Ibid., p. 174.

[69]Johnsonian Studies, ed. Magdi Wahba (Cairo, 1962), p. 241.

[70]Ibid., p. 249.

[71]Ibid., p. 250.

[72]Ibid., pp. 247-48. Johnson's comment is taken from Fleischauer's text.

[73]Ibid., pp. 243-45.

[74]Ibid., p. 244. Once again, Johnson is quoted from Fleischauer's text.

[75]Ibid., p. 255.

[76]Ibid., p. 256. Oliver Sigworth has recently offered still another perspective on the judgment of Lycidas. He contends that Johnson knew and ought to have remained sympathetic to the goals of the Renaissance pastoral. But Sigworth believes the facts of Johnson's life were at variance with his critical heritage: "He was the first major literary critic in England who had in his own life a gamut of experience which utterly belied the Renaissance literary precepts, and whose later associations were primarily bourgeois -- with publishers rather than with patrons, with brewers rather than with lords." As a consequence, Sigworth thinks that Johnson simply gravitated toward a more modern view that literature should be a direct reflection of life. See "Johnson's Lycidas: The End of Renaissance Criticism," Eighteenth-Century Studies, I (1967), 166.

[77]Samuel Johnson, pp. 490, 486.

[78]Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism, p. 161.

[79]The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, p. 219.

[80]"Johnson's Criticism of the Metaphysical Poets," ELH, XVII (1950), 59.

[81]Johnson apparently continues to generate at least some Milton scholarship as well. F. T. Prince prefaces his study of the Italian influence on Milton's verse as follows: "This study was suggested by Dr. Johnson's observation that one of the sources of Milton's peculiar diction was 'his familiarity with the Tuscan poets.'" The Italian Element in Milton's Verse (Oxford, 1954), p. vii.

[82]It must be noted that at least one twentieth century writer has undertaken a defense of Cowley against Johnson. H. W. Garrod characterized Johnson's strictures as "qualified malice." The Profession of Poetry (Oxford, 1929), p. 114. Although Garrod seems intent on celebrating the merits of Cowley's Odes, his language is something less than straightforward, and William Kenney believes that "Garrod tries to say that Cowley's Odes were the greatest ever written, but he phrases his statement so that he can avoid being thought of as having lost his mind." "The Modern Reputation of Samuel Johnson," p. 236.

[83]The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry (Toronto, 1953), p. 19. It is not to be inferred that Ransom pays a great deal of attention to Johnson in The World's Body (New York, 1938). But in passing he does judge Johnson to be "a just if never profound critic [who had] a dry Protestant temper" (p. 294). Ransom uses the term "Protestant" to designate an attitude which, unlike that of Catholicism in its various branches, is afraid to particularize the God which, in Ransom's opinion, lies beyond the world which can be seen through the eye of scientific positivitism (pp. 293-94). Ransom believes that Johnson "[oscillated] fairly between these two prejudices," and strongly implies that whatever merit he had derived from inherited "Catholic" assumptions "which he may have thought of as old-fashioned decency" (p. 294).

[84]Selected Essays, p. 245.

[85]P. 49.

[86](New York, 1947), p. 212.

[87]The Breaking of the Circle, p. 4.

[88]P. 243. Brooks is actually talking about Yvor Winters and Samuel Johnson in this context, but the emendation does not seem to distort his meaning. His complete statement is: "Mr. Winters' criticism, like that of Johnson, has its admirable qualities" (p. 243).

[89]See "The Light Symbolism in 'L'Allegro-Il Penseroso,'" pp. 50-66.

[90]Samuel Johnson, a Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 89, 101, 98.

[91]Ibid., p. 90.

[92]Ibid., pp. 89, 101.

[93]Ibid., pp. 99, 97.

[94]Ibid., pp. 100-01.

[95]The World's Body, p. x. For a stronger statement of the idea of poetry as modern man's one access to the fulness of experience, see "The Concrete Universal: Observations on the Understanding of Poetry," Poems and Essays (New York, 1955), pp. 159-85. Concerning metaphor, Ransom says: "To say 'metaphor' tirelessly, with brutal repetition, is one militant way of defending nature as the element to which the Universal is referred, and therefore the element to which poetry has to look. I think the defenders of poetry would not mind saying that they are not prepared to abandon nature, because that would be the abandonment of metaphor, which . . . when they have weighed it, would be a serious abridgment of the range of human experience" (p. 181).

[96]"Johnson as Critic," p. 78.

[97]"Johnson on the Metaphysical Poets," p. 101. Tate had commented earlier on the radical disparity between Johnson's cultural milieu and his own. In a review of D. Nichol Smith's edition of Johnson's poems, he said: "The literary scene is no longer a spontaneous outgrowth of the attitude of society, or an instrument of social solidarity. It is no longer a comprehension of differences, but a record of them. Since the public does not know what it wants the writer withdraws to a private world." "Taste and Dr. Johnson," New Republic, LXVIII (August 19, 1931), 23.

[98]"Dr. Johnson and Modern Criticism," pp. 72-73.

[99]The World's Body, p. 294.

[100]A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, I, 98-99. M. H. Abrams believes that it is "in accordance with the chronological conditions set by The Lives of the Poets that [Johnson's] concern was rather with the mannerist, Cowley, than with Donne." "The Truth About Dr. Johnson," p. 312.

[101](Princeton, 1936).

[102]"Dr. Johnson on the Imagination: A Note," RES, XXII (1946), 132.

[103]Ibid., p. 133.

[104]"Johnson on Wit and Metaphysical Poetry," ELH, XX (1953), 203.

[105]Ibid., pp. 208-09.

[106]Ibid., p. 211.

[107]Ibid., p. 217.

[108]"The Truth About Dr. Johnson," p. 311.

[109]Criticism: The Major Texts (New York, 1952), p. 204.

[110]"Introduction," John Donne, a Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, 1962), p. 4.

[111]"Johnson's Criticism of the Metaphysical Poets," ELH, XVII (1950), 59.

[112]Ibid., p. 70.

[113]Ibid., p. 62.

[114]Ibid., p. 63.

[115]Ibid., p. 68.

[116]Ibid., pp. 69-70.

[117]The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, p. 127. Most readers will recall that Johnson does not have a great deal to say about Swift's writings. But what he does say is scarcely worthy of his great acumen. He expresses doubt that Swift even wrote A Tale of a Tub and identifies Gulliver's Travels as a work which was written "in open defiance of truth and regularity." He believed it was an affront to good taste as well, noting in reference to the Yahoos that "he that formed those images had nothing filthy to learn." Lives of the English Poets (London, 1925), II, 249, 261, 272. He damned Swift's poetry with the faintest kind of praise: "To divide this collection into classes, and show how some pieces are gross, and some are trifling, would be to tell the reader what he knows already, and to find faults of which the author could not be ignorant, who certainly wrote not often to his judgment, but his humour" (pp. 273-74).

[118]"Swift, Johnson, and the Dublin M. A.," American Notes and Queries, September, 1965, p. 6.

[119]Lives of Men of Letters and Science who Flourished in the Time of George III, II, 70-71.

[120]Young Sam Johnson (New York, 1953), p. 353.

[121]The Peace of the Augustans, p. 196.

[122]Perilous Balance, The Tragic Genius of Swift, Johnson and Sterne (Princeton, 1939), p. 48.

[123]Samuel Johnson, pp. 460-61.

[124]Samuel Johnson and his Times, p. 39.

[125]"Autobiographical Reflections in Johnson's 'Life of Swift,'" Discourse, VIII (1965), 45.

[126]A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe, II, 491.

[127]John Dryden: Some Biographical Facts and Problems (New York, 1940), pp. 34-37.

[128]Literary Criticism, A Short History, p. 331.

[129]The Common Pursuit, pp. 113-14.

[130]"Introduction," Dryden, a Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Bernard N. Schilling (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), p. 2.

[131]The Literary Critics, p. 81.

[132]"Samuel Johnson's Criticism of Pope in the Life of Pope," RES, V n. s. (1954), 37. Boyce believes that Johnson leaned heavily on Spence, Addison, Dennis, Ayre, Dilworth, Stockdale, Shiels, Warburton, Ruffhead, and Lord Kames. Frederick W. Hilles disagrees. He believes that Johnson's commentary "is based on statements of only two of his predecessors," Ruffhead and Warton. See "The Making of the Life of Pope," New Light on Dr. Johnson, Essays on the Occasion of his 250th Birthday, ed. Frederick W. Hilles (New Haven, 1959), p. 269. Of the two, Hilles believes that Johnson concentrated most on Warton: "As he brought his biography to a close, Johnson trained his guns on his most dangerous opponent. His best criticism was called forth by the questions Warton had raised" (p. 272).

[133]"Samuel Johnson's Criticism of Pope in the Life of Pope," pp. 40-41.

[134]Ibid., p. 46.

[135]The Peace of the Augustans, pp. 204-05.

[136]F. R. Leavis, "Johnson as Critic," p. 87.

[137]Six Essays on Johnson, p. 166.

[138]"The Authority of Johnson," pp. 569-70.

[139]"Dr. Johnson and the Literature of Experience," Johnsonian Studies, p. 21.

[140]Ibid., p. 21.

[141]Literary Criticism, A Short History, pp. 316, 331.

[142]A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, I, 86-87.

[143]Samuel Johnson, p. 326.

[144]"Imlac and the Business of the Poet," Studies in Criticism and Aesthetics, 1660-1800, Essays in Honor of Samuel Holt Monk, eds. Howard Anderson and John S. Shea (Minneapolis, 1967), pp. 312-14.

[145]PMLA, LXII (1947), 174-76, passim.

[146]PQ, XXVII (April 1948), 131.

[147]Ibid., p. 132.

[148]The Mirror and the Lamp, pp. 39-40.

[149]The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, pp. 199-200.

[150]The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism, pp. 63-64.

[151]Passionate Intelligence (Baltimore, 1967), p. 79.

[152]Critical Approaches to Literature, p. 82.

[153]A Critical History of English Literature (London, 1961), II, 785.

[154]Samuel Johnson, p. 317.

[155]"Johnson on Shakespeare," pp. 8-9.

[156]A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, I, 82.

[157]The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, p. 207.

[158]On Poetry and Poets, p. 211.

CHAPTER VI

A SUMMING-UP AND A GLANCE AHEAD

At the outset of this study, it was suggested that, while true in its major delineations, the conventional view of what happened to Samuel Johnson's reputation as a critic between his day and our own stands in need of certain minor modifications. As we have seen, there is good reason to believe that Johnson's performance chart should be revised as follows: as before, his line should originate near the top of the chart at 1784. But in starting his line there we should keep in mind Isaac Newton Walker's well-documented contention that, by 1784, Johnson's approach to literature "was rapidly giving way to the more generous ideal of 'sympathetic criticism,'" and that Johnson's common reader accordingly was tending "to divide [his moral and critical sentiments] and generally to estimate Johnson the moralist somewhat higher than he did Johnson the critic."[1]

But no matter where Johnson's line originates it must reflect a dramatic decline to a point near the bottom of the chart by 1825. As was conceded earlier, to deny that Johnson's influence declined in the first decades of the nineteenth century is to suggest that the Romantic movement did not take place. Contrary to what Macaulay has led us all to believe, however, Johnson was down but never out. As we saw in Chapter Two, his criticism continued to hold the respectful attention of a significant number

of nineteenth century writers. Hence his line should proceed laterally -- close to the bottom of the chart, perhaps, but still on it -- to 1854. From that date, which marked the publication of Peter Cunningham's edition of the Lives of the Poets, there can be little doubt that Johnson's line should reflect a slight but nevertheless respectable climb. As we have seen, the years which followed 1854 were crowded with new editions of the Lives. These were favorably reviewed and, if some of the writers encountered in Chapter One are to be believed, rather widely read in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. Moreover, there is at least some evidence to support the view that even the Shakespeare criticism continued to have some following in these years. In short, then, it seems clear that, although admittedly in disgrace with a majority of nineteenth century authorities, Johnson the critic not only continued to exert an active influence in the world of letters but actually enjoyed a mild revival in the years between 1875 and 1910. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to extend his line to a point perhaps a fifth of the way up the chart at 1910.

But, contrary to what we have assumed, 1910 does not mark the starting point of any huge leap forward in Johnson's reputation. To be sure, Sir Walter Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson does appear in this year, and it is not to be doubted that Raleigh -- albeit clearly to a lesser extent than D. Nichol Smith -- was influential in upgrading Johnson's standing

with later writers on Shakespeare. Furthermore, it was noted in the preceding chapter that the Shakespeare criticism plainly constitutes a bridge between Johnson's nineteenth and twentieth century reputations. But to insist that the twentieth century revival of Johnson's criticism begins in 1910 is to ignore the fact that, all things considered, the nineteen-twenties and thirties were probably the leanest and most inhospitable years that Johnson the critic has ever known. The reason for his decline in these decades seems obvious enough. As we saw in Chapter Three, the writers of this period -- even those who were sympathetic to Johnson -- tended to bog down on the question of his role in the transition from Neoclassical to Romantic criticism and to base their estimate of his importance on their decision as to whether he had resisted Romanticism or helped to bring it about. Granted the assumptions underlying most of their inquiries, this preoccupation with Johnson's role as a transitional critic could only have unfortunate results insofar as his reputation was concerned. Depending on the decision reached, he was categorized as either an enemy of progress or a humble precursor of far greater critics. Therefore, despite the fact that D. Nichol Smith and others were writing favorably on Johnson's Shakespeare criticism in these years and despite the fact that T. S. Eliot took up Johnson's cause in the early nineteen-thirties, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the years between the World Wars are to be regarded as the nadir of Johnson's influence as a critic. Certainly no other age has

been less interested in his criticism as criticism. Consequently, the line on Johnson's chart should reflect not only a decline after 1910 but probably a decline to an all-time low.

After 1950, of course, our chart does not need modification. Indeed, our discussion in Chapter Four does no more than prove what we knew already: that since the end of World War II Johnson the critic has scored gains which can only be termed spectacular. In this connection, it was suggested earlier that the publication in 1944 of Joseph Wood Krutch's Samuel Johnson probably marks the real starting point of the latest revival of Johnson's criticism. But other important writers played an active part in launching this revival, among them D. Nichol Smith, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and M. H. Abrams. Yet there is still another critic who, although he never wrote extensively on Johnson, nevertheless figures prominently in Johnson's modern reputation. Because that critic, R. S. Crane, insisted over a long and influential career that eighteenth century criticism be evaluated on its own terms rather than those of following ages, he obviously helped to clear the way for a fresh appreciation of Johnson. Moreover, his influence is evident in the studies of such strong Johnson defenders as M. H. Abrams, W. R. Keast, and Jean Hagstrum.

Pervasive as it is, however, Johnson's influence does not carry equal weight in all areas of the modern world of letters. Even the most cursory glance at recent histories of criticism is sufficient to convince

us that Johnson's present-day reputation is indeed a checkered affair. To be sure, he stands high in the studies of Abrams and Watson. But Atkins and Bosker give us good reason to believe that the early twentieth century view is still with us -- the view which held Johnson to be important primarily because he had either helped or hindered the onrush of Romanticism. In addition, the histories of Wellek and Wimsatt offer convincing proof that Johnson does not enjoy the confidence of those powerful modern critics who insist that art is autonomous. Moreover, the brief but contemptuous comment of Northrop Frye -- cited in Chapter Four -- leads us to infer that Johnson may not be revered by the new myth-and-symbol school of criticism. Finally, it is obvious that other noteworthy modern critics have paid even less attention to Johnson's criticism than Frye has done.

Nevertheless, as we noted at the conclusion of Chapter Four, an impressive number of our most important critics have endorsed the opinion that Johnson is the best exemplar to be found of what a literary critic ideally ought to be. Moreover, Johnson seems to have exerted a significant degree of influence on two of the most prominent of these supporters, T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis. Finally, as we saw in the preceding chapter, he has been a dominant influence in some of the most important areas of modern scholarship, namely the criticism of Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, and Donne and his followers.

On balance, then, we can say that Johnson the critic stands high

today, perhaps higher than any other great English critic of the past. Yet, although we can tell at a glance that the line on Johnson's chart ought to reflect a steep and dramatic ascent after 1944, we cannot say with any degree of certainty how far that line should extend or how Johnson's present influence compares with his influence in previous ages. It is here, of course, that any attempt to chart a literary reputation must break down. Accurate comparisons cannot be made because the literary marketplace is not always the same. Moreover, the phenomenon we are attempting to cope with is scarcely static. The literary stock market never closes, and it is not to be doubted that great events are taking place re Johnson even as these words are being written. But nevertheless it seems safe to say that Johnson's criticism exerts more influence today than at any time since his death. To pursue the stock market metaphor one step further, we can conclude that, despite the distrust of some of our most important investors, Johnson's criticism continues to be traded in an active market which shows no signs of bearishness.

As revised, then, our performance chart no longer reflects the spectacular ups and downs of the original, and it seems clear that we must abandon the notion that we have rescued Johnson from the total neglect of the nineteenth century. But any disappointment we might feel in this connection should be more than compensated by the realization that Johnson has never really needed to be rescued. Although admittedly his prospects

looked pretty bleak in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, it is nevertheless true that he has never been entirely out of the picture. Despite the fact that great revolutions in taste have taken place and powerful new schools of criticism have emerged to challenge his most fundamental assumptions about the nature and function of art, Johnson has always found a few supporters. Indeed, between 1875 and 1910 and after 1944, he can be said to have found more than a few.

Therefore, since -- contrary to what we have assumed -- his criticism has pleased at least some and pleased long, it may be appropriate for us to conclude this study with a brief consideration of the qualities of Johnson's criticism which appear to account for his enduring appeal. These are not difficult to isolate and describe. First and foremost, readers of all subsequent ages have admired Johnson's understanding of human nature and human experience. To be sure, most nineteenth century authorities insisted that the realm of poetry lay beyond ordinary human experience, and, in our time, a powerful critical school has arisen to argue that the discreteness of the work of art must remain inviolate if meaningful aesthetic judgments are to be made. But every age produces important writers who believe that a major function of the literary critic is to build a bridge between literature and life, and wherever this view prevails it need hardly be said that Samuel Johnson has always stood supreme. In recent years, Joseph Wood Krutch, Jean Hagstrum, W. R. Keast, and Walter Jackson

Bate have all defended Johnson's criticism from precisely this point of view.

On the more technical side, it is evident that the qualities of Johnson's criticism which have been most consistently admired are, as George Watson has contended, those of a superb descriptive critic. Stated briefly, those qualities are clarity of vision, power of concentration, and lucidity and force of expression. Throughout this study we have encountered commentators who admired Johnson's ability to see a text clearly, isolate important issues crisply, and give his opinions on those issues in clear and compelling language. Moreover, these same writers have usually admired his candor and consistency. They have been confident, in other words, that Johnson was not holding anything back or surreptitiously adapting his point of view to the occasion. It was precisely these qualities which led so many nineteenth century writers to insist that Johnson, though generally thought to be wrong, was nevertheless more instructive and valuable than other critics who were generally thought to be right. It is precisely these qualities which, in our own day, T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis have found so admirable.

These qualities enabled Johnson to produce a solid body of reasoned critical judgments which will probably never be duplicated, and it requires no great insight to perceive how useful this body of criticism has been to subsequent generations. The exact nature of this usefulness seems to have been described first and best by Matthew Arnold, who believed that Johnson's

criticism was "admirably fitted to serve as a point de repère, a fixed and thoroughly known centre of departure and return, to the student of English literature."[2] The reader will doubtless recall in this connection that many of the most important modern writers dealt with in the foregoing chapters have echoed Arnold's opinion that because we know so well where Johnson is we know better where we are. Indeed, it seems clear that even those critics who take their theory from Coleridge and German Idealism tend to rely on Johnson for orientation in their practical criticism. Therefore, it may be proper to designate Johnson as the great Gibraltar of British criticism, the massive and unmistakable landmark which all later English speaking critics, friendly or otherwise, have tended to relate to. Since there is no other presence remotely like him, it seems probable that Johnson will continue to serve as the most prominent point de repère in English letters.

But the future will have to reveal itself. Looking ahead, we can only conjecture that the schools of criticism which now prevail will fall away and that others will rise to take their place. If these new schools are anything like the ones which have sprung up since Johnson's death, they may not find much merit in his criticism. But the past likewise prompts us to believe that Johnson will nevertheless continue to find vigorous supporters, supporters who will doubtless praise him for precisely the qualities we have just enumerated. T. S. Eliot made an interesting observation

on this subject in 1944, the year which seems to mark the beginning of the current upsurge of interest in Johnson's criticism. He noted that "when several tides [of influence] have risen or fallen, great writers remain of equal potentiality of influence in the future." Then, turning to Johnson -- a critic whom Eliot, but few others, could be said to support at the time -- he added: "It remains to be seen whether the literary influence of Johnson, as, in political thought, the influence of his friend of the other party, Edmund Burke, does not merely await a generation which has not yet been born to receive it."[3] In view of the dramatic revival of Johnson's criticism which has taken place since 1944, it might be inferred that the generation which Eliot foresaw was rolling up its sleeves to go to work even as he spoke. Yet it is possible that there is a generation to come which will value Johnson the critic more highly than we have done. On the other hand, it is equally possible that Johnson's influence will decline as new schools of criticism emerge. But it seems unlikely that Johnson the critic will be forgotten. As we have seen, he never has been forgotten. Indeed, if this study has any value it is that of providing a clearer understanding than we have had of the durability and extent of his appeal.

NOTES

CHAPTER VI

[1]"Johnson's Criticism Criticized," p. 159.

[2]"Johnson's Lives," p. 193.

[3]*On Poetry and Poets*, p. 185.

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Joseph E. Stockwell was born July 10, 1925, in Knoxville, Tennessee, the son of Joseph E. Stockwell of Louisville, Kentucky, and Grace Harrison Stockwell of Natchitoches, Louisiana. He was reared in New Roads, Louisiana, and graduated from St. Joseph's Academy there in 1943. From 1943 through 1945 he served in the Army of the U. S., seeing active service as an infantryman in the Seventh Army in Europe. He entered Tulane University in 1946 and graduated from that institution with a B.A. in 1949, then attended Stanford University on a creative writing fellowship in 1950-51. Thereafter he did public relations work for various air line companies until 1958, when he joined Midwestern University, Wichita Falls, Texas, as Director of the Evening College. He entered graduate study at L. S. U. in the fall of 1962. Now Assistant Professor of English at Mississippi State University, Mr. Stockwell is married to the former Brenda Sartoris, of Jackson, Mississippi. He has two children by a previous marriage, Anne Ross Stockwell and Joseph E. Stockwell III.

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Title of Thesis: Samuel Johnson's Reputation as a Critic

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Date of Examination:

May 15, 1969